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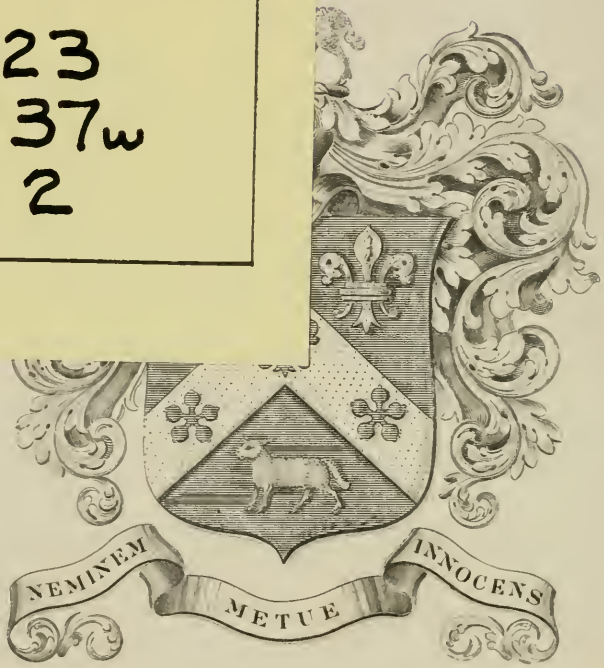

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WORLD'S END.

WORLD'S END.

A Story

IN THREE BOOKS.

BY

RICHARD JEFFERIES.

"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."—ECCLES.

BOOK II.—PERSONS.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.
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WORLD'S END.

BOOK II.

PERSONS.

CHAPTER I.

FORTY-THREE miles as the crow flies, south of Stirmingham, there stands upon the lonely Downs a solitary, lichen-grown post, originally intended to direct wayfarers upon those trackless wastes.

In winter, when the herbage, always short, was shortest, and when the ground was softened by rain, there might be detected the ruts left by waggon wheels crossing each other in various directions;

but road, or path properly so-called, there was none, and a stranger might as well have been placed on the desert of the Sahara. For time, and the rain blown with tremendous force across these open Downs by the wind, had all but obliterated the painted letters upon the cross-arms, and none but those acquainted with the country could have understood the fragmentary inscriptions.

Some mischievous ploughboys or shepherd lads, tired of arranging flints in fanciful rows, or cutting their names upon the turf, had improved the shining hour by climbing up this post, pulling out the arms, and inserting them in the opposite mortices, thereby making the poor post an unwitting liar. This same section of the population had also energetically pelted all the milestones for far around with flints, till the graven letters upon them were beaten out. Such wooden wit was their only resource in a place where *Punch*

never penetrated; for this lonesome spot was appropriately named World's End, or, it was locally pronounced, Wurdel's End.

The undulating downs surrounded it upon every side, dotted here and there at long distances with farmsteads and a few cottages, and now and then a small village or hamlet of ten or a dozen houses grouped together in a "combe," or narrow valley, where there happened to be a spring of water and a "bourne" or stream. Yet World's End was not altogether to be despised. In this out-of-the-way place there was perhaps the finest natural race-course in England, to which the uneven uphill course at Epsom, made famous by the Derby, was but an exercise ground.

A level stretch of sweet, elastic turf, half a mile wide, ran in a line something like half a horse-shoe, under the steep Downs, for a distance of two miles, unimpeded by hedge, ditch, or enclosed field, and

obstructed only in a few spots by thick bushes of furze and a few scattered hawthorn trees.

A spectator standing upon the Downs had the whole of this Plain, as it was called, at once under his eye; could see a horse start and watch it gallop to the goal. From an ancient earthwork camp or "castle," this Down was known as Berbury Hill, and the level plain was often called Berbury racecourse.

For from time immemorial rustic sports, and local races between the horses of the neighbouring farmers, had taken place twice a year under the Berbury Hill. The sports were held in the early spring; the races proper, according to custom, came off in October. They were of the most primitive character, as may be judged from the following poster, which the kindness of a printer and bookbinder at Barnham—the nearest town—enables us to present to the reader. He had preserved a copy of it,

having returned the original to the committee, who sat at the Shepherd's Bush Inn upon the Downs:—

"Take Notiss. The Public is hereby Invite to the Grand open and Hurdle Rases and Steple-Chaces at Wurdel's End which is to come off on Wensday after old Michelmuss Day. All particlars of the Stewards which is Martin Brown, William Smith, Philip Lewis, Ted Pontin. Illegul Beting is stoped."

This copy had in the corner, "Please print two Score and send by Carrier," and the unfortunate printer, ashamed to issue such a circular, sent it back with an amended form for approval; but the carrier forgot the letter, and it was not delivered till a week after the event—not that much was lost by the failure to give this species of publicity to the races. The day was well known to all those who were likely to attend. The half-dozen gipsies, with the cocoanut sticks and gingerbread stall, duly

arrived, and took up their quarters in a fir copse where the ground was dry, and the tree-trunks sheltered them somewhat from the breeze which always blows over the Downs.

Most of the spectators were hill men. There still lingers the old feud between the hill and vale—not so fierce, toned down to an occasional growl—but Nature herself seems to have provided a never-ceasing ground of quarrel. These two races, the hill and the vale men, must always put up opposing prayers to heaven. The vale prays for fine and dry weather; the hill prays for wet. How then can they possibly agree? Not more than three knots of men and half a dozen wenches came up from the vale, and these gave pretty good evidence that they had called *en route* at the Shepherd's Bush, for they were singing in chorus the lament of the young woman who went to the trysting place to meet her faithless swain:—

But what was there to make her sad?
The gate was there, but not the lad;
Which made poor Mary to sigh and to say
Young William shan't be mine!

The committee were in a moveable shepherd's hut on wheels, where also was the weighing-room and the weights, some of which were stone "quarters."

Just where the judges post was erected the course was roped for a hundred yards to insure the horses arriving at the right place, but otherwise it was open. By the side of these ropes the traps and four-wheelers and ramshackle gigs of the farmers were drawn up, with their wives and daughters, who had come to see the fun.

Among these there was one pony-carriage drawn by two handsome ponies, with a peacock's feather behind their ears and silver bells on the harness, which, simple enough in itself, had a stylish look beside these battered and worn-out vehicles. It belonged to Jason Waldron, who was generally credited with "Esquire" after his

name, and the lady who sat alone in it was his daughter Violet. Mr. Waldron was not there.

Violet was attended by a young man, plainly dressed, very pale, whose slight frame gave him an effeminate appearance in contrast with the burly forms, and weather-beaten faces of those acquaintances who from time to time nodded and spoke as they passed. The pony-carriage was drawn up under an ancient hawthorn tree, whose gnarled and twisted trunk, slow in growth, may have witnessed the formation of the entrenchment on the hill by the Britons themselves. The first frosts of autumn had blackened the leaves, and the mingling of the grey of the trunk and its lichen with the dark colour of the leaves and the red peggles or berries, under a warm, glowing, mellow sunshine, caused the tree to assume a peculiar bronze-like tint.

It may be that the sun in all his broad domains did not shine that day upon a

more lovely being than Violet Waldron. Aymer Malet, the young man at her side—whose Norman name ill-assorted with his coarse garments, too plainly speaking of poverty—would have sworn that her equal did not walk the earth, and he would have had good warrant for his belief.

Poor Aymer was out of place in that rude throng, and tormented himself with fears lest he should appear despicable in her eyes, as so inferior to those stalwart men in size and strength. He should have known better; but he was young and had lived so long with those who despised him that a habit of self-depreciation had insensibly grown upon him. It is needless to go back into his pedigree. He was well descended, but an orphan and friendless, except for the single uncle who had given a roof and a bed to lie on to his sister's child.

Martin Brown was a well-meaning man, honest and sturdy, but totally incapable

of comprehending that all men are not absorbed in sheep and turnips. He was moderately well off, but, like all true farmers, frugal to the extreme. Never a penny did Aymer get from him. Martin would have said: "Thee doesn't work; thee doesn't even mind a few ewes. If thee'll go bird-keeping I'll pay thee."

Aymer wished for work, but not work of that class. He remembered one golden year spent in London with a friend of his dead father (who had lost his all by horse-racing), where he was permitted to read at will in a magnificent library, and was supplied with money to visit those art-galleries and collections in which his heart delighted. The friend died; the widow had no interest in him, and Aymer returned to the turnips and sheep. But even in that brief period the impulse had been given; the seed had been sown and had fallen in fertile ground, which gave increase a hundredfold.

The boy—he was but twenty then—was

a born genius. He could not help it; it would force him on. What he wanted was books. He could get no money to purchase them; circulating libraries had not yet established agencies upon the open Downs. By a strange contradiction he became a poacher, and the cleverest hand at setting a wire for miles. Tenants were not allowed to shoot in that district, but they might course hares as much as they pleased.

Aymer wired the ground-game, sold them to the carriers who went by, and through the carriers got books slowly and one by one from the county town. In this way he bought many of Bohn's fine series—the finest and most useful, perhaps, ever issued —he read Plato and Aristotle, Livy, Xenophon — the poets, the philosophers, the dramatists of ancient Rome and Greece; and although it was not in their original tongue, the vivid imagination of the man carried him back to their day, and enabled him to realise those stirring scenes, to feel

their passions, and comprehend their arguments. He bought also most of the English poets, a few historians, and a large number of scientific works, for he was devoured with an eager curiosity to understand the stars that shone so brilliantly upon those hills—the phenomena of Nature with which he was brought in daily contact. When he had mastered a book, his friends the carriers, who called at the Shepherd's Bush, took it back to the county town and resold it for half-price, and these small sums went towards fresh purchases.

It may have been that these very untoward circumstances which would, to all appearance, have checked the growth of his mind, actually tended to assist it. He saw—he felt Nature. The wind, that whistled through the grass and sighed in the tops of the dark fir trees, spoke to him in a mystic language. The great sun, in unclouded splendour slowly passing over the wide, endless hills, told him a part of the

secret. His books were not read, in the common sense of the term: they were *thought* through. Not a sentence but was thought over, examined, and its full meaning grasped and firmly imprinted on the memory.

Poor Aymer! How desperately he longed to escape! How the soft summer breeze seemed to woo him onwards he knew not whither! How the sun seemed to beckon, till he fancied he could hear the echo of the surge as it roared on the far-distant beach!

He did escape once—only for a little while, to be forced ignominiously back again, amid the jeers of his acquaintances. This happened before he knew Violet. By dint of catching hares and rabbits, and by selling off an accumulation of books, and by disposing of his gold watch—his only property—he managed to get some twenty pounds, and with that sum went straight to Florence.

It was in spring, just before the warm summer comes, and he revelled in the

beauty of Italian skies and landscapes as he travelled. But his destination was the Palazzo, which contains the statue of ideal woman, known as the Venus de Medici. He stood before the living marble, rapt in thought, and then suddenly burst into tears.

This was perhaps childish. He had his faults; he was extremely proud and over-sensitive. The sudden transition from the harsh and rude life at World's End, among the weather-beaten and rough-speaking rustics, to this new world of inexpressible beauty, overcame him. Hastily he brushed those tears away, and recovered himself; but not so quickly as to escape the observation of two sad grey eyes. Inadvertently, as he stood before the statue, he had interfered with the line of sight of a lady who was engaged in sketching. She had paused, and noticing his rapt attention, made no sign that he had interrupted her work. Thus she witnessed his weakness; and being a person of a thoughtful, perhaps

too thoughtful, turn, she wondered at and pondered over it.

Day by day Aymer, while his funds lasted and he could stay in Florence, came and stood before the statue, lingering for hours in its close vicinity; so that the artist, as she sketched, had the fullest opportunity of noting the strong contrast between his delicate, intellectual features and slight, tall frame, and the coarse dress he wore. Growing interested, she instructed her attendants to make inquiries, and they easily elicited the name of the stranger, and the place from which he had come.

By a curious coincidence, it so happened that the lady-artist herself was the owner of a family mansion, and moderately large estate but a few miles from Aymer's home. He was, in fact, perfectly familiar with her name, which was a household word at World's End, where distinguished names were few; but moving in his low sphere he had never seen her face.

Lady Lechester—Agnes Lechester to her friends—was "lord of herself, that heritage of woe," and being of an artistic turn of mind, had spent much of her time upon the Continent; another reason being certain unhappy matters connected with the history of the family mansion. She was much struck with the singularity of a mere lad of low and poor estate thus coming to Florence, obviously from pure love of the beautiful. Nothing approaching to affection sprang up in her mind; it must be distinctly understood that her interest was of a different character entirely. But from that moment Aymer unconsciously became the subject of a certain amount of surveillance. He deemed himself despised and unnoticed by all; but there was one who had not forgotten him.

Those happy days in lovely Florence passed like a dream. Even by living on a few fruits and a little bread alone, the scanty stock of money he had carried with him could not be made to last for ever.

Barely a month of pure, unalloyed pleasure—pure in every sense of the term—and poor Aymer, who knew not how to get employment in a foreign city, was obliged to return, and Agnes Lechester saw him no more standing in rapt admiration before the famous statue.

Aymer reached Dover with five shillings in his pocket, and walked the whole of the distance, one hundred and fifty miles, to World's End, often sleeping out at night under a rick. Slight as he was in frame, he possessed considerable power of enduring fatigue, and had a way of lounging idly along the road, abstracted in thought, and so walking mile after mile, till he woke up at his destination.

They laughed him to scorn at World's End. The poor fellow wandered about in the daytime on the Downs, hiding in the fir copses, lying on the ancient earthwork entrenchment, and dreaming of his fair Florence, so many hundreds of miles away.

He grew dejected and hopeless till he saw Violet. Then in time, the very destiny he deemed so harsh in confining him to that rude spot seemed even superior to the glorious possibilities he had hoped for. For Violet took the place of the marble goddess; yet there never was a beauty less like the Venus de Medici. Lovely as are the ideals men have created for themselves, it sometimes happens that Nature presents us with a rare gem, surpassing those cold conceptions of the mind as far as the sun is above the earth.

CHAPTER II.

VIOLET returned from a long visit to friends near London just about the time that Aymer reached home, weary and footsore, from Dover. Although The Place, as Jason Waldron's house was called, was but two miles from World's End, Aymer had never seen her. She was but rarely at home, for Waldron had given her the best education money could buy, and this necessitated much absence from her native hills. But, education and visits over, Violet, with a happy heart, returned to the dear old home at last.

It was on one lovely afternoon in May that Aymer saw her for the first time. He was lying upon the ground hidden in the brake which grew round the hedge of a

fir copse on the Downs. Through this copse there ran a narrow green lane or track. He was reading his favourite little book of poetry—one that he always carried in his pocket—the tiny edition of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets, published by William James Brown, thirty years since, and now out of print.

Somehow the spirit of those sonnets and that peculiar poetry had penetrated into his mind. The little book was annotated on its narrow margin with notes in his own handwriting, and he knew the greater part of it by heart. He had just read the sonnet beginning—

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun ;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red.
> * * * * *
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare,

when the sound of horse's hoofs made him look up.

A lady, riding on a black horse, had entered the green lane, and was passing

slowly at a walk. It was Violet Waldron. All that English beauty which seemed to pervade the poetry of wonderful Will, to Aymer's fancy appeared to be hers. She passed him, and was gone, but her presence was left behind.

Aymer could not have analysed her then —if asked, he could have barely recounted the colour of her hair. Yet she dwelt with him—hovered about him; he fed upon the remembrance of her until he had seen her again. By slow degrees he grew to understand the reason of her surpassing loveliness —to note the separate features, to examine the colours and the lines that composed this enchanting picture. A new life dawned upon him—a new worship, so to say.

It happened that Martin Brown had some business to transact with Jason Waldron. Waldron bore the reputation of being a "scholard;" he was known to be comparatively wealthy; he did not mix with

the society of World's End; and he was held in some sort of awe by the rude and uneducated residents in the locality.

Much as he despised that useless Aymer Malet, Martin in his secret heart felt that he was better fitted to meet and talk with Mr. Waldron than himself. Aymer was, therefore, accredited to The Place. He went with no little trepidation, knowing that it was Violet's home, and sharing to some extent the local hesitation to meet Waldron, who, being an invalid, he had never seen. Mr. Waldron received him with a cordial courtesy, which quickly put him at his ease. When the grey-haired, handsome old man, sitting in his Bath-chair in the shadow of a sycamore-tree, extended his hand and said: "I had some slight knowledge of your father, Mr. Malet —he came of a good family," poor Aymer forgot his coarse dress, and exhibited the bearing of a born gentleman. He could not help admiring the garden in which he

found his host. This evidently genuine admiration pleased Waldron extremely, for the garden had been the solace of his retired manhood, and of his helpless age. He began to talk about it directly.

"It is the trees," he said; "it is the trees that make it look well. Trees are really far more beautiful than flowers. I planted most of them; you have heard the Eastern saying, Mr. Malet—that those who plant trees live long. That yew-hedge?—no; I did not plant that. Such hedges are rare now—that hedge has been growing fully a hundred years—the stems, if you will look, are of immense size. To my mind, the old English yew is a greater favourite than the many foreign evergreens now introduced. The filbert walk?—yes; I planted that. Come and see me in a few months' time, and you shall crack as many as you choose. The old house picturesque?—it is: I wish I had a sketch of it. You draw?—a little; now try. Take out your

pocket-book—ah! I see you have a regular artist's sketch-book."

To tell the honest truth, Aymer was not a little pleased to have the opportunity of exhibiting his skill before some one who could appreciate it. He was a natural draughtsman. I do not think he ever, even in later and more fortunate days, attempted colours; but with pencil and crayon, or pen and ink, he was inimitable. Once at work with his pencil, Aymer grew absorbed and forgot everything—even the presence of the invalid, who watched him with interest. The gables and the roof, the curious mullioned windows, the chimney-stacks, the coat of arms and fantastic gurgoyles, then the trees and arbours grew upon the paper.

"Ah! that's my window," said a low voice.

His pencil slipped and made a thick stroke—he looked round, it was Violet.

For the first time he looked into her eyes.

and met her face to face. He could not draw. His hand would not keep steady; he blamed it to the heat of the summer sun. Violet declared it was her fault.

Mr. Waldron seized the incomplete sketch, and insisted upon *Mr.* Malet (the title, humble as it was, was pleasant to Aymer's ears) returning to finish it next day.

In his confusion Aymer somehow got away, and then remembered that the sketch-book he had left behind was full of drawings, and amongst them there were two that brought a flush to his brow as he thought of them. One was Violet on horseback; the other a profile of her face. He wished to return and claim his book, and yet he hesitated. A sweet uncertainty as to what she would think mastered him. He dared not venture back. The next day passed, and the next—still he did not go—a week, a fortnight.

He could not summon up courage. Then came a note for "A. Malet, Esq."—that

"Esq." subjected him to bitter ridicule from rude old Martin—from Mr. Waldron, inquiring if he had been ill, and begging him to visit at The Place, according to promise.

There was no escape. He went; and from that hour the intimacy increased and ripened till not a day passed without some part of it being spent with the Waldrons. Violet had seen her portrait in the sketch-book, but she said not a word. She made Aymer draw everything that took her fancy. Once he was bold enough to ask to sketch her hand. She blushed, and became all dignity; Aymer cowered. He was not bold enough. How could he be? With barely a shilling in his pocket, rough corduroy trousers, an old battered hat, a black coat almost green from long exposure to sun and rain;—after years of ridicule and jeering how could he face her?

His heart was full, but his lips dared not speak. His timidity and over-sensitiveness made him blind to signs and tokens that

would have been instantly apparent to others of harder mould. He never saw the overtures that the growing love in Violet's breast compelled her to offer. He tormented himself day and night with thinking how to compass and obtain her love, when it was his already.

The one great difficulty was his poverty. Think how he would, he could discover no method by which it could be remedied. He had no means of obtaining employment, and employment would imply absence from her. How could he make her love him? He turned to his faithful friend and adviser, dear old Will. The tiny volume of poems was carefully scanned, and he lit upon those verses commencing—

> When as thine eye hath chose the dame
> And stall'd the deer that thou shouldst strike.

He asked himself if he had done as the lover was advised—

> And when thou com'st thy tale to tell
> Smooth not thy tongue with filed talk.

Certainly he had not attempted to beguile her with insinuating flattery—

> But plainly say thou lov'st her well,
> And set her person forth to sale.

This he had not done. How dare he say he loved her well? He had not the courage to praise her person.

> And to her will frame all thy ways.

This he was willing and ready enough to do. He believed he had done so already; but read on—

> Spare not to spend, and chiefly there
> Where thy desert may merit praise
> By ringing in thy lady's ear.

Here he was at a standstill. He could not spend; he could not even dress as a gentleman. He could not make her rich and beautiful presents.

> The strongest castle, tower, and town
> The golden bullet beats it down.

He had no golden bullets—to him the castle was therefore impregnable.

> Serve always with assured trust,
> And in thy suit be humble, true—

Advice such as this last he could and did follow conscientiously.

> Have you not heard it said full oft,
> A woman's nay doth stand for nought?—

Encouraging to those who could press the question, but he had not even courage to get the first nay. It was the "golden bullet"—the lack of the power to spend—the miserable poverty which pressed upon him with a leaden weight. He did his best to follow infallible Will's advice. He snared twenty hares and sold them; he had still a small gold pencil-case left—it had belonged to his mother. He sold that also.

On foot he walked forty miles to Reading, and spent the whole proceeds in the purchase of a pair of fine jet bracelets, which his instinct told him would look well upon Violet's white wrist. When he had got them, came the difficulty—how could he give them to her? At last he employed a shepherd lad to leave a parcel for Miss Waldron.

He kept away several days, but love was more powerful than shame. He went.

With Violet he strolled up the long shady filbert walk, with the clusters, now ripe, hanging overhead. His heart beat fast, but he said nothing. On her part she was silent. Suddenly she lifted up her arm and reached after a cluster of the nuts high up. Her sleeve fell down; the beautiful arm was bare to the elbow, and there was the bracelet!

Her eyes met his; a lovely colour suffused her cheek. An uncontrollable impulse seized him. He caught her hand and kissed it. Why linger? No one can tell how these things come about. Their lips met, and it is enough.

That was the happiest autumn Aymer ever knew. Even now he looks back at its sweetness with a species of regret. The sunshine was warmer, the blue of the sky richer, the yellow mist that hung over the landscape softer, the bee went by with

a joyous hum, the crimson-and-gold of the dying leaves was more brilliant than ever it had been before or since. Love lent his palette to Nature, and the world was aglow with colour. How delicious it is to see everything through the medium, and in the company of a noble girl just ripening into womanhood! I remember one such summer—

> But age with his stealing steps
> Has clawed me in his clutch.

She was very beautiful; it is hard to describe her. It was not perhaps so much the features, the hue of the hair, the colour of the eye, the complexion, or even the shape, as the life, the vitality, the wonderful freshness which seemed to throw a sudden light over her, as when the sunshine falls upon a bed of flowers:—

> Idalian Aphrodite, beautiful,
> Fresh as the foam, new-bathed in Paphian wells,
> With rosy, slender fingers backward drew
> From her warm brows and bosom, her deep hair
> Ambrosial, golden round her lucid throat

And shoulder: from the violets her light foot
Shone rosy-white, and o'er her rounded form
Between the shadows of the vine-bunches
Floated the glowing sunlights as she moved.

The modern taste for catalogues compels me to name the colour of her eye and hair. Her eye was full, large, and lustrous; that deep black so rarely seen—an eye that gave quick expression to the emotions of the heart—that flashed with laughter, or melted with tenderness. Her hair was not quite golden; it was properly brown, but so near the true golden that a little sunlight lit it up with a glossy radiance impossible to express in words. The complexion was that lovely mingling of red and white, which the prince in the fairy tale prayed his lady-love might have, when he saw the crimson blood of a raven he had slain, staining the translucent marble slab upon which it had fallen. The nose was nearly straight; the lips full and scarlet. She was tall, but not too tall. It is difficult for a woman to have a good carriage unless she

be of moderate height. Enough of the catalogue system.

They visited all the places in the neighbourhood where Aymer's pencil could find a subject. Now it was a grand old beech-tree; now only a grey stone, set up centuries and centuries since as a "stone of memorial" by races long reduced to ashes; now The Towers, the home of Lady Lechester. With them always went Dando, Waldron's favourite dog, a huge mastiff, who gambolled about in unwieldly antics at Violet's feet.

Aymer listened to her as she played. He sat by the invalid under the shadow of the sycamore tree near the open window, where he could see her sitting at the piano, pouring forth the music of Mendelssohn in that peculiar monotonous cadence which marks the master's works and fills the mind with a pleasant melancholy. Now and then her head turned, a glance met his, and then the long eyelashes drooped again. Presently

out she would come with a rush, making old Dando (short for Dandolo) bound and bark with delight as he raced her round the green, tearing her flowing dress with his teeth, and whisking away when she tried to catch him.

The grace of her motions, the suppleness of her lithe form, filled Aymer's heart with a fierce desire to clasp her waist and devour her lips, while the invalid laughed aloud at the heavy bounds of his dog. The old man saw clearly what was going forward, yet he did not put forth his hand to stay it. They were a happy trio that summer and autumn at World's End.

CHAPTER III.

THE summer passed away, as all things do, the winter, and the spring blossomed afresh, and still the course of true love ran smooth with Aymer and Violet.

The winter had been only one degree less pleasant than the summer. Violet had a beautiful voice; Aymer's was not nearly so fine: still, it was fairly good, and scarcely an evening passed without duets and solos on the pianoforte, while old Waldron, animated for the time beyond his wont, accompanied them upon the violin. He had an instrument which, next to his daughter and his dog Dando, he valued above all things. It was by Guarnerius, and he handled it with more care than a

mother does her infant, expatiating upon the quality of the wood, the sycamore and pine, the beauty of the varnish, the peculiar, inimitable curl of the scroll, which had genius in its very twist.

Aymer was a ready listener. In the first place, he had grown to look upon Waldron in the light that he would have regarded an affectionate and beneficent father. Then he was, above all things, anxious to please Violet, and he knew that she adored the Silver Fleece, as she called him, in laughing allusion to his odd Christian name, Jason, and to his grey hairs. And, lastly, he really did feel a curiosity and a desire to learn.

Sometimes Aymer gave Violet lessons in drawing, and she repaid him with lessons in French and music, being proficient in both.

After awhile Waldron discovered that this boy, without means or friends, had made himself acquainted with the classics,

and had even journeyed as a pilgrim to the shrines of ancient art at Florence.

At this he was highly pleased. He at once set to work to ground Aymer in the original languages in which Plato and Livy wrote. He taught him to appreciate the delicate allusions, and exquisite turn of diction, of Horace. He corrected the crude ideas which the self-instructed student had formed, and opened to him the wide field of modern criticism. The effect upon Aymer's mind was most beneficial, and the old man, while teaching the youth, felt his heart, already predisposed, yearning towards him more and more.

To Violet this was especially a happy omen, for she, above all things, loved her only parent, and had not ceased to fear lest her affection for Aymer should be met by his disapproval. As time went on, the ties of intimacy still further strengthened.

Waldron was now often seen in deep thought, and left the young people more to

themselves. He busied himself with pen and ink, with calculations and figures, to the subject-matter of which he did not ask their attention.

Even yet Aymer had not thought of marriage; even yet he had not overcome his constitutional sensitiveness so much as to contemplate such a possibility. It was enough to dwell in the sunshine of her presence. Thoroughly happy in her love, he never thought of to-morrow. Perhaps it is a matter to be regretted that we cannot always remain in this state—ever enjoying the ideal without approaching nearer to the realisation, for the realisation, let it be never so glorious, is of the earth, earthy.

It is quite true that women like courage, and that boldness often goes a long way; but it is questionable whether with high-bred natures a subdued, quiet, and delicate manner does not go still further. Aymer was incapable of self-laudation, of that de-

testable conceit which some think it proper to show when they have made what they are pleased to call "a conquest." Pity the poor castles that have stooped to them!

His happiness had but one alloy—the perpetual remembrance of his own unworthiness, the immeasurable difference in his worldly position, which made it a presumption in him even to frequent her presence, much less to bask in her love. There were plenty who did not fail to remind him of this discrepancy in their mutual positions, for his intimacy at The Place could not, of course, pass unnoticed.

Martin Brown said nothing whatever. If there was any alteration in his manner as the truth dawned on him, it was in favour of Aymer. With such men everything is judged by results. While Aymer went about sketching alone, he despised him and his pencil; the moment the very same talent obtained him the notice of

those in a superior station, then Aymer was no longer such a fool. Martin said nothing. He refrained from his former jeers, and abstained from telling Aymer to go and mind the sheep.

It was also to his advantage that Aymer should get rich acquaintances, and so possibly obtain a livelihood, and relieve him of an expense which, however small, was always a bitter subject with him.

But there were others—farmers' sons—in the district who did not spare Aymer. They despised him; they could not understand him; and they hated him for his luck in carrying off the squire's daughter. They credited him with the most mercenary motives, and called him a beggarly upstart. If Aymer chanced to pass near them he was saluted with ironical bows and cheers, and hats were obsequiously doffed to "My Lord Muck," or "My Lord Would-Be."

He made no reply, but the insult went home. He knew that there was a great

deal of ground for this treatment. He knew that his conduct must appear in such a light to others; and yet how welcome they always made him at The Place. He questioned himself if he was doing right; sometimes his pride said "Go; carve yourself a fortune, and then return for her;" but love, strong love always conquered and drove him forward. He deemed that, with the exception of Violet and Waldron, all the world looked upon him with contempt. He was wrong.

In the spring, Violet began to ride again over the Downs. This habit for a moment again lowered Aymer in his own estimation, for he had no horse to accompany her. What was his delight and astonishment when one day Violet took him to the stables and asked him how he liked the new grey horse. It was a handsome animal —Aymer admired it, as in duty bound, and as, indeed, he could not help, yet with a heart full of mortification, when Violet

whispered that papa had bought it for him to ride with her. She flung her arms, in her own impulsive way, round his neck, kissed him, and rushed away to don her riding-habit before he could recover from his astonishment.

It was true. In an hour's time they were galloping over the soft springy turf of the Downs, trying the paces of the grey, who proved faster than the black. The rides were repeated day by day; and it often happened that, while thus enjoying themselves, they passed one or more of those very persons who had so often insulted Aymer.

Instead of sitting firmer and with pride in his saddle, Aymer felt that he all the more deserved their censure, and looked the other way as he went by.

He did not know that there was one eye at least that watched him with pleasure, and with something like a quiet envy. It was the same grey eye that had observed him in the Palazzo at Florence.

Agnes Lechester had returned to England to spend some time at the old Towers, and had not failed to make inquiries for the young pilgrim who, in coarse garb, she had seen at the shrine of art. She heard of the intimacy with Waldron, whom she had once or twice spoken to; and as the lovers rode slowly beneath her grand and comfortless home, she sat at her window, and paused in her art-work, and looked down upon them and sighed. She could not but envy them their joy and youth, their path strewn with roses and lighted by love. She had no need to envy Violet's beauty, for, although no longer young, Agnes Lechester was a fine woman. It was the life, the full glowing life, she deemed so desirable. And she rejoiced that the poor pilgrim had found so fair a lady-love. So that there was one eye at least which, unknown to Aymer, watched him with a quiet pleasure and approval. Had he known it, it would have encouraged him

greatly. By precipitating matters it might have prevented—but let us proceed.

Jason Waldron knew that his daughter loved, and was beloved. He was no ordinary man. His life had been spent far from those money-making centres where, in time, the best of natures loses its original bias, and sees nothing but gold. Age, he believed, had given him some power of penetration; and in Aymer he thought he had found one in a thousand—one with whom his darling daughter's future would be safe. "He will not follow the universal idol," thought the old man. "He will be content with art and literature, with nature and with Violet. I can see nothing in store for them but the happiest of lives." He waited long, expecting Aymer to approach the subject in some distant manner. At last he comprehended his reluctance. "He is poor and proud — he is afraid, and no wonder," he thought. "He shall not suffer for that."

The benevolent old man, anxious only to complete the happiness of those he loved, resolved to be the first, and to hold out a welcoming hand. One day he called for Aymer to his study, and motioning him to a seat, averted his face, not to confuse him, and said that he had long seen the mutual affection between Violet and him. He understood why Aymer had refrained from taking him into his confidence—he could appreciate the difficulties of his position. Without any hesitation, he approved of Violet's choice. His own years had now begun to weigh upon him, and he grew daily more anxious that Violet should be settled. He proposed, therefore, that if Aymer would not mind the arrangement, they should be united as speedily as possible, and that after a short trip they should return and live with him at The Place. He could not spare Violet entirely —he must hear the sound of her voice, and see the light of her eyes, while yet the

power to do so remained with him. He was not really rich. In that poor district, indeed, he appeared so, but it was only by comparison. Were he to be placed in some great city, side by side with the men whose trade was gold, his little all would sink into the utmost insignificance. Beside rude rustics, who lived from hand to mouth, content if they paid the rent, and perhaps put by a hundred guineas in the county bank, he was well off; but not when weighed against the world.

He had but the house he dwelt in, a few acres of surrounding pasture, and three thousand pounds placed out on loan. This money brought in a good interest, but he had lately thought of calling it in for greater safety, as he felt himself to be getting old in every sense of the term.

It was obvious, therefore, that on the score of expense alone it would be difficult for him to give a dower to Violet sufficient to support a second home. If they could

be happy with him, why he should be content.

He turned and held out his hand to Aymer. Aymer took it, but could say nothing. He was literally overwhelmed. To him, after so long a solitude, after so much contempt, this marvellous good fortune was overpowering. Jason pretended not to notice his confusion.

"We understand one another," he said. "It is agreed, is it not?"

Despite all his attempts, Aymer could but incline his head.

"It is a lovely day—take Violet for a ride to Berbury camp."

How Aymer managed to convey what had passed to Violet he never knew, but that was the longest ride they ever had together, and it was dark before The Place was reached.

Aymer did not go home after quitting Violet. He walked away upon the Downs until safe from observation, then threw him-

self upon the sward, and poured out his heart in thanksgiving. When he had grown a little calmer he leant against a beech-trunk and gazed at the stars. In that short hour upon the solitary Downs he lived a whole lifetime of happiness. There are some of us who can remember such hours—they occur but once to any human being.

To do the rough residents of the district justice, so soon as it was understood to be settled that they were to be married, then the tone of the place changed, and they no longer insulted and annoyed him. Some wished him joy and happiness: not without a tinge of envy at his good fortune, expressed in the rude language of the hills, "I wish I had thee luck, lad."

It was generally agreed that when the marriage took place there should be an arch erected and decorated with flowers, for the bride and bridegroom to pass under; that the path through the churchyard should be strewn with roses, that volleys of firearms

should be discharged, and the day kept as a holiday. This was settled at the Shepherd's Bush over foaming jugs of ale.

"Arter all," said an old fellow, "he beant such a bad sort o' chap. A' mind a' tuk a main bit o' trouble loike to pull a ewe o' mine out of a ditch where hur laid on her back."

"Ay, ay!" said another; "and a' drawed my little Kittie on the kitchen wall wi' a bit o' charcoal as natural as ever hur walked —zo let's gie 'un a rouser, chaps, and no mistake!"

This was how it happened that at World's End Races that fateful year, early in October, a delicate-looking young man, commonly dressed, stood beside the pretty pony carriage under the hawthorn tree. The marriage was fixed for that day week.

CHAPTER IV.

THE marriage would have taken place earlier but for two circumstances: first, the difficulty of obtaining the wedding outfit for Violet in that out-of-the-way place; and secondly, because Jason insisted upon some important alterations being made in the old house, in order to render it more comfortable for his children.

There is no event in life which causes so much discussion, such pleasant anticipation, as the marriage-day; and at The Place there was not a single thing left unmentioned; every detail of the ceremony was talked over, and it was a standing joke of Jason's to tell Violet to study her prayer-book, a remark that never failed to make the blood mount to her forehead.

She grew somewhat pensive as the final moment approached—with all her youth and spirits, with all the happy omens that accompanied the course of her love, she could not view this, the most important step she would ever take, always with thoughtless levity. She became silent and thoughtful, gave up riding, and devoted herself almost exclusively to attending upon Jason, till Aymer—silly fellow!—grew jealous, and declared it was unkind of her to look forward to the wedding-day as if it was a sentence of imprisonment.

Mr. Waldron had lived so retired that there was some little difficulty in fixing upon a representative to give Violet away, for as an invalid he could not himself go to the church; and this was the only thing he was heard to regret—that he should not see Violet married. However, he consoled himself with the thought that he should see her immediately afterwards, as the church was hardly half a mile distant,

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down in a narrow combe or valley. After some reflection, Mr. Waldron decided upon asking his solicitor, Mr. Merton, of Barnham, to act as his representative and give the bride away.

Merton, who was an old bachelor, was really delighted at the idea, but with true professional mendacity made an immense virtue of the sacrifice of time it entailed. He really was so busy with a great law case just coming on that really—but then his old friend Waldron, and lovely Miss Violet—duty pulled him one way and inclination another, and beauty, as was proper, triumphed.

Violet had few acquaintances, and it was more difficult still to find her a bridesmaid —not that there were not plenty ready to fill that onerous post—but she disliked the idea of a stranger. Mr. Merton, the solicitor, solved the difficulty by suggesting a niece of his, a merry girl whom Violet had met once or twice.

Aymer could not do less than ask old Martin Brown to stand as his best man, never dreaming that he would accept the task. But what was his surprise when Martin declared that he should enjoy the fun, and would rather miss Barnham fair than not be there. He came out tolerably handsome for him; he offered Aymer a five-pound note to purchase a suitable dress! This note Aymer very respectfully declined to take, and the farmer, half repenting of his generosity, did not press him too hard. Yet he could not help expressing his wonder as to how Aymer meant to appear at church. "Thee bisn't a-goin' to marry th' squire's darter in thee ould hat?"

Aymer smiled and said nothing. Fortune had aided him in this way too. After endless disappointments and "returned with thanks," he had suddenly received a cheque for a sketch of his which had been accepted by an illustrated paper. Immediately afterwards came another cheque for a short

story accepted by a magazine. This success, small as it was, elated him, if anything, more than the approaching marriage-day. He had tried, and tried, and tried, and failed again and again, till he despaired and ceased to make the attempt, till the necessity of obtaining some clothes drove him to the last desperate venture. He was elated beyond measure. A successful author, a successful artist, and just about to marry the most beautiful woman in the world!

He resolved to tell Violet nothing about it, but to show her the sketch and the story as they were upon their trip. Thus it was that he was independent of Martin's grudging generosity. Fortune did not stop even here. As if determined to shower delight upon him—to make up at one blow for the cruel isolation, the miserable restraint he had undergone—she never seemed to tire of opening up fresh vistas of pleasure. Both Violet and Aymer would have been satisfied, and more than satisfied,

with a simple visit to the seaside; but Jason was not so easily pleased. His daughter was his life—nothing was too good for her—and, besides, such an event happened but once in a lifetime, and it was fit and proper that it be accompanied with memorable circumstances. He announced his intention of sending his children to Florence.

To Florence, the beautiful city, which dwelt for ever in Aymer's dreams—the city he had described time after time to Violet, till the girl thought it the finest upon earth. He was to revisit Florence, and to revisit it with Violet! His heart was full—it would have been impossible to add another blessing.

Violet raced about the house and the garden, teasing Dando to distraction—all her pensiveness dispelled, murmuring "Florence" at every turn. What further joy could there be in store?—it was impossible. It is almost safe to say that these two were the happiest in England.

Well they might be. They had all upon their side—*i.e.*, youth.

Violet was to be married upon her twenty-first birthday; Aymer was twenty-three only. Money—not riches—but sufficient for an easy life. Italy in view—the land of the artist and the poet! It was like a fairy dream!

The days flew by. The dresses came—oh, what eager discussions and conferences there were over the dresses! All the farmers' daughters and wives in the neighbourhood to whom Violet was even distantly known, claimed the privilege to see the trousseau. In London it would have been overlooked—there all things are upon a grand scale.

At World's End the ladies were never tired of descanting upon the glories of the silk and satin, the lace and tulle. How can a wretched, unsympathising man describe the sensation produced by Violet's wedding outfit?

The dear girl was in ecstasies. Waldron had gone to the utmost limit of his purse—his friend Merton even frowned a little—but he argued it was only for once—just this once—he must be permitted a little extravagance on Violet's marriage day.

Aymer was again plagued with his old tormentors—they did not sneer or jeer at him, but he had to run the gauntlet of rude jokes and rustic wit. He forgave them, and asked as many as he could to the breakfast.

The breakfast was to be laid out in that very apartment the window of which opened upon the garden near the sycamore tree, where he had sat so many times listening to Violet playing upon the pianoforte. There was of course a cake, and there was to be what had never before been seen or tasted at World's End from time immemorial—*i.e.*, several dozens of cham pagne.

If the wedding outfit caused a sensation among the ladies, this champagne was all the talk among the men. They thought of nothing else—it was the subject of endless allusions and unabating anticipation. Here and there was one who could say he had tasted the wine—when after a good hunting spin Lord So-and-So had asked the sportsmen to refresh themselves at his mansion. But the majority had not the faintest notion of what it was like, and formed the most fantastic expectations. There were a few who doubted whether there would be any champagne, and treated it as a myth, till the servants at The Place, proud of their importance, admitted some favoured individuals who were regaled in secret with—the taste?—no, but the view only of certain tall bottles dressed in rosy tissue paper, upon the removal of which stood out the far-famed silver-foil, and doubt was no more. World's End was full of its first champagne treat.

Old Martin Brown swelled up into a person of enormous importance, as being the nearest relative of the bridegroom; he was looked upon as an oracle, and his remarks listened to with intense interest at the nightly tobacco parliament at the Shepherd's Bush.

The carriers took fabulous reports of what was to happen at World's End all over the district, and scores of honest people made up their minds to trudge to Bury Wick Church.

Aymer was no longer knocked up at five in the morning, as was the custom, to breakfast at six. He was undisturbed. No more jeers and contempt—he was treated with deference. "My nevvy" was a success; Martin spoke of his "nevvy" as if the connection did him honour.

I hope among the readers of this history there will be many ladies who can remember their feelings on the approach of the marriage day. Let them kindly recall those

moments of wild excitement, of trepidation lest some accident should happen, of a half-hesitation, of a desire to plunge at once and get it over—and approximately they will understand Violet's heart.

Even yet Fortune had not exhausted her favours. On the morning of World's End Races, just one short week before the day, there came a letter in an unknown handwriting, addressed to Aymer Malet, Esq., enclosing five ten-pound notes from an anonymous donor, who wished him every felicity, and advised him to persevere in his art studies.

This extraordinary gift, so totally unexpected, filled Aymer with astonishment. It seemed as if it had dropped from the skies, for he had not the remotest suspicion that Lady Lechester was watching him with interest.

At last the day came. Violet was awake at the earliest dawn, and saw the sun rise, clear and cloudless, from the window. It

was one of those days which sometimes occur in autumn, with all the beauty and warmth of summer, without its burning heat, and made still more delicious by the sensation of idle drowsiness—a day for lotos eating. The beech trees already showed an orange tint in places; the maples were turning scarlet; the oaks had a trace of buff. The rooks lazily cawed as they flew off with the acorns, the hills were half hidden with a yellowy vapour, and a few distant fleecy clouds, far up, floated in the azure. A dream-like, luxurious day, such as happens but once a year!

Violet was up with the sun—how could she rest? Miss Merton was with her, chatting gaily. Oh, the mysteries of the toilet! my feeble pen must leave that topic to imagination. All I can say is, that it seemed as if it never would be completed, notwithstanding the reiterated warnings of Jason that the time was going fast.

There came one more pleasant surprise.

A strange man on horseback was seen riding up to The Place. This was so rare an event that Violet's heart beat fast, fearing lest even at the eleventh hour something should happen to cause delay. She waited; her hands trembled. Even the delicious toilet had to be suspended.

Footsteps came up the staircase, and then the maidservant, bearing in her hand a small parcel, advanced to Miss Waldron. With trembling fingers she cut the string—it was a delicate casket of mother-of-pearl. The key was in it; she opened the lid, and an involuntary exclamation of surprise and admiration burst from her lips.

There lay the loveliest necklace of pearls that ever the sun had shone upon. Rich, costly pearls—pearls that were exactly fitted above all jewels for her—pearls that she had always wished for—pearls! They were round her neck in a moment.

Miss Merton was in raptures; the maidservant lost her wits, and ran downstairs

calling every one to go up and see Miss Vi'let "in them shiners!"

For awhile, in the surprise and wonder, the donor had been forgotten. Under the necklace was a delicate pink note, offering Lady Lechester's sincere desire that Miss Waldron would long wear her little present, and wishing her every good thing. When the wedding trip was over, would *Mrs.* Aymer Malet let her know that she might call?

Violet was not perfect any more than other girls; she had naturally a vein of pride; she did feel no little elation at this auspicious mark of attention and regard from a person in Lady Lechester's position. The rank of the donor added to the value of the gift.

Mr. Waldron was much affected by this token of esteem. He could not express his pleasure to the giver, because her messenger had galloped off the moment he had delivered the parcel. The importance of the bride, great enough before, immediately rose

ninety per cent. in the eyes of Miss Merton, and a hundred and fifty per cent. in the eyes of the lower classes.

Mr. Waldron, examining the pearls with the eye of a connoisseur, valued them at the very lowest at two hundred guineas. The involuntary tears of the poor pilgrim at the shrine of art had indeed solidified into gems!

The news flew over the adjacent village of Bury Wick; the servants at The Place spread it abroad, and in ten minutes it was known far and wide. The excitement was intense. Champagne was grand enough—but pearls! World's End went wild! Champagne and pearls in one day! The whole place turned out to give the bride a triumphant reception.

Aymer was forgotten in the excitement over Violet: forgotten, but not by the bride. All she wished was to be able to show him her present—but etiquette forbade his being sent for on that particular morning; he must meet her at the church.

At the church—goodness! these pearls had delayed the toilet, and ten o'clock had struck. At eleven—ah! at eleven!

Mr. Merton had not arrived yet. He had arranged to bring his carriage; at The Place they had nothing grander than the pony carriage. Mr. Merton, anxious to do the thing well, as he expressed it, had sent word that he should bring his carriage and pair of greys, to take the bride to the church.

From the earliest dawn the bells at Bury Church had been going from time to time; and every now and then there was a scattered fire of musketry, like skirmishing; it was the young farmers and their friends arriving with their guns and saluting.

But at a quarter-past ten there was a commotion. The bells burst out merrier than ever; there was volley after volley of musketry, and cheering which penetrated even to the chamber of the bride, where she sat before the mirror with the pearls round

her neck. It was Merton driving up in style, with his greys decorated with wedding favours.

Bang! clang! shout, and hurrah! The band from Barnham struck up "See the Conquering Hero comes!" There never was such a glorious day before or since at World's End.

"Nevvy," said old Martin, already a little warm, and slapping Aymer on the back, "nevvy, my buoy! Thee bist th' luckiest dog in Inglandt—champagne and purls—Ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER V.

THERE was an attempt at order, but it was an utter failure. The men came crowding after Merton's carriage shouting and firing guns, the horses snorted, and when Violet glanced from the window, the excitement of the scene made her hesitate and draw back.

Merton—a regular *lady's bachelor*, so to say—was equal to the occasion; it was not the first at which he had assisted. He at once became the soul of the ceremonies. He congratulated Waldron, hastened everybody, went into the apartment where the breakfast was laid out, and with his own hands re-arranged it to his satisfaction, shouting out all the time to the bride to make haste.

She came at last. How few brides look well in their wedding-dresses. Even girls who are undeniably handsome fail to stand the trying ordeal; but Violet was so happy, so radiant, she could not help but appear to the best advantage.

Poor old Jason's lip quivered as he gazed at his girl's face—for the last time as *his*—his lip quivered, and the words of his blessing would not come; his throat swelled, and a tear gathered in his eye. She bent and kissed him, turned and crossed the threshold.

Waldron wheeled himself to the large open window, and watched her walk to the carriage along the carpet, put down that her feet might not touch the ground.

Who shall presume to analyse the feelings of that proud and happy old man? The carriage moved, the crowd shouted, the guns fired; he wheeled his chair a little round, and his head leant forward. Was he thinking of a day twenty-two years ago,

when he—not a young man, but still full of hope—led another fair bride to the altar; a bride who had long since left him?

It was an ovation—a triumph all the way along that short half-mile to the church: particularly as they entered the village. The greys pranced slowly, lifting their hoofs well up, champing the bit, proud of their burden. The bride and Miss Merton sat on one seat, Mr. Merton on the other. All the men and boys and children, all the shepherds and ploughboys for miles and miles, who had gathered together, set up a shout. The bells rang merrily, the guns popped and banged, handkerchiefs were waved. Across the village street, but a few yards from the churchyard lych-gate, they had erected an arch—as had been determined on at the Shepherd's Bush—an arch that would have done credit to more pretentious places, with the motto, "Joy be with you."

The bride dismounted at the lych-gate,

which was itself covered with flowers, and set her foot upon the scarlet cloth which the good old vicar had himself provided, and which was laid down right to the porch.

The churchyard was full of children, chiefly girls, all carrying roses and flowers to strew the path of the happy couple when they emerged united. In the porch the ringers stood, four on each side, with their hands upon the ropes ready to clash forth the news that the deed was done. The old old clerk was there, in his black suit, which had done duty on so many occasions.

She entered the little church—small, but extremely ancient. She passed the antique font, her light footstep pressed upon the recumbent brazen image of a knight of other days. The venerable vicar advanced to meet her, the sunshine falling on his grey head. But where was Aymer? Surely all must be well: but she could not see him—not for the moment. True-hearted, loving Violet had looked for Aymer with his

old battered hat, in the corduroy trousers and the green coat she had known him in so long.

For the moment she barely recognised the handsome, gentlemanly man before her. It was Aymer—oh yes, it was Aymer—and how noble he looked now that he was dressed as became him. Her heart gave another bound of joy—involuntarily she stepped forward; what could be wanting to complete her happiness that day? Certainly it would have been hard to have named one single thing as lacking—not one. The pews were full of women of all classes—they had been mostly reserved for them—the men finding standing room as best they could; and a buzz of admiration went round the church as Violet came into full view. Her dress was good—it was nothing to belles who flourish in Belgravia; but at World's End—goodness, it was Paris itself.

That costume formed the one great topic

of conversation for years afterwards. I know nothing of these things; but Miss Merton told me a few days ago that the bride wore a wreath of white rosebuds and myrtle upon her lovely head, and a veil of real Brussels lace. Her earrings were of rubies and diamonds—a present that morning from gallant Mr. Merton. She had a plain locket (with a portrait of Waldron), and wore the splendid necklace of pearls, the gift of Lady Lechester.

Her dress was white satin, trimmed with Brussels lace, and her feet were shod in satin boots. Of course the "rosy, slender fingers" were cased in the traditional white kid, and around her wrist was a bracelet of solid dull gold—the bridegroom's present, only delivered just as she stepped into the carriage. She carried a bouquet of stephanotis, orange, and myrtle.

It is very likely I have misunderstood Miss Merton's lively description, but I think that the above was something like

it. Miss Merton herself wore a white silk trimmed with turquoise blue, a gold locket with monogram in turquoise and pearls, and earrings to match—a gift from Mr. Waldron—and a bouquet, I think, chiefly of white roses and jessamine.

It was a lovely sight. The sunshine fell upon the bride as she advanced up the aisle—fell upon her through the antique panes which softened and mellowed the light. Never did a fairer bride mount the chancel steps.

Aymer waited for her. Till now Violet had been comparatively calm; but now, face to face with the clergyman robed in white, near to the altar and its holy associations, as the first tones of his sonorous voice fell upon her ear, what wonder that her knees trembled and the blood forsook her cheek. Aymer surreptitiously, and before he had a right in etiquette to do so, touched her hand gently—it strengthened and revived her; she blushed slightly, and

the vicar's voice, as he gazed upon her beauty, involuntarily softened and fell. While his lips uttered the oft-repeated words, so known by heart that the book in his hand was unneeded, his soul offered up a prayer that this fair creature—yes, just this one—should be spared those pains and miseries which were ordained upon the human race.

The flag upon the church tower waved in the gentle breeze; the children were marshalled beside the path in two long rows, with their hands full of flowers; the women in the cottages were hunting up the old slippers and shoes; the men looked to the caps upon the nipples of their guns; the handsome greys snorted at the gate; and the grand old sun, above all, bathed the village in a flood of light. I cannot linger over it longer.

The solemn adjuration was put, the question asked, and Aymer in an audible voice replied, "I will." The still more

solemn adjuration to the woman was repeated—it is but a few words, but it conveys a world of meaning, it sums up a lifetime—and Violet's answer was upon her lips, when, before she could form the words, the chancel side-door burst open, and there——

There before her very eyes, before the bride to whom that day was consecrated, who for that one day was by all law human and divine to be kept from all miserable things, there stood an awe-struck, gasping man, whose white shirt-front was one broad sheet of crimson blood.

It is difficult to gather together, from the confused narratives of those who were present, what really happened in consecutive order, but this is nearly it. Not only was his shirt-front blood, but his grey hair and partially bald head were spotted that awful red, and his trembling hands dripped —the blood literally dripped from them on to the stone pavement. For one awful

moment there was a pause—utter silence. The man staggered forward and said in broken tones, but audible over the whole church—

"Miss Violet; your father is *dead!*"

And the bride dropped like a stone before Aymer at her side, or Merton just behind, could grasp her arm. She was down upon the cold stone floor, her wedding-dress all crumpled up, her wreath fallen off, the light of life and love gone from her eyes, the happy glow from her cheek. Even in that moment the clergyman's heart smote him. His impious prayer! That this one because of her beauty should be spared—and struck down before his very eyes in the midst of her joy and triumph. All that they could see in the body of the church was a shapeless heap of satin where but a moment before had stood the most envied of them all.

Aymer knelt and lifted her head; it lay helpless upon his hands. As he did so the wedding-ring, which he had ready, slipped

unnoticed from his grasp and was lost. When it was missed, days afterwards, and a search was instituted, it could not be found, and this the superstitious treasured up as a remarkable fact.

Merton raised her up; her frame was limp and helpless in their arms. They carried her to the vestry and brought water. Miss Merton, trembling as she was, did not faint; but, good, brave girl, did her best.

In the excitement over the bride, even the man who had brought this awful news was for the moment forgotten. When they looked for him he was leaning against the altar-rails, as if about to fall, and some of the blood was spotted on the sacred altar-cloth. The men rushed at him; the women, afraid, held back and watched what new harm must come. They deemed that it was some horrible creature; they could not believe that it was only the old gardener at The Place—Waldron's oldest servant.

Only the gardener. He was as helpless as themselves. He had over-exerted himself running to the church with his dreadful tidings, and being subject to heart disease, he could barely stand, and only gasp out that "Master was killed, and quite dead!"

The men, finding nothing could be got from him, ran out, and made direct for The Place. Some leapt on their horses, but those on foot crossing the meadow, as the gardener had done, got there first. All the men made for The Place—all the women stayed to see what would become of the bride.

It was a dead faint, but it was not long before she came to, and immediately insisted upon being taken home. They would have detained her in the vestry till at least confirmation of the dreadful intelligence had arrived. But no, she begged and prayed them to take her; and fearing lest uncertainty should do more harm than

certainty, they half-led, half-carried her from the church.

There was not a dry eye among the sympathising women who had remained—not one among those rude, half-educated people whose heart was not bursting with sorrow for the poor shrinking form that was borne through their midst.

But a few short moments since, and how proud and happy had she been advancing up the aisle! The children were gone from the churchyard; their flowers cast away, not in the pathway of the bride, but on the graves. In their haste, they had trod upon the scarlet cloth laid down, and discoloured and stained it. The ringers had deserted the bell-ropes, the village street was empty and silent—only the unconscious flag waved upon the tower, and the arch stood for them to pass beneath, with its motto—now a bitter mockery—"Joy be with you!"

The carriage rolled along the road, and as they approached The Place, Merton

began to recover his professional calm; and the return of his mind to a more normal state was marked by doubt—Was it true?

But no sooner had they entered the garden than he saw it was. The faces of the knots of men, their low, hushed voices, all told but one tale—death had been there!

They tried to get Violet to go upstairs to her own room, but she would not. "I must see him!" was her cry. "I must see him!"

She pushed through them. All gave way before her. Not *there*, surely? Yes, there—in the very room where the wedding-breakfast was laid out, where the cake stood upon the table, and the champagne-bottles at the side; there, in the place of joy, was the dead—dead in his armchair, close to the window, with a ghastly wound upon the once-peaceful brow!

She threw up her hands—she uttered a great cry. Those that heard it say it rings

even now in their ears. She threw herself upon him. The crimson blood dyed her veil, as it hung loose and torn, and tinged the innocent pearls around her neck with its terrible hue. She fainted the second time, and would have fallen, but Aymer caught her; and they bore her upstairs, unconscious even of her misery.

The Place was silent. The guns were not fired, the bells were stilled. Men moved with careful footsteps, women hushed their voices, and in the stillness they heard the church clock slowly striking the hour of noon. At that moment she should have been returning, radiant and blissful in triumph, to meet the welcome from her father's lips.

There was one that could not understand it—one dumb beast that could not be driven away. It was Dando, the mastiff dog. Strangely enough, he avoided the chamber of the dead, and crouched at the door of Violet's room.

When Merton saw it he said, "Let the dog go in; maybe, he will relieve her a little."

But Violet, lying on a couch, conscious now and tearless, despairing in the darkened room, motioned him away. "Take him away," she said. "If he had been faithful, he would have watched and guarded."

It was a natural thought, but it was not just. Poor Dando, like the rest, had gone to the church with the crowd; and just at the moment when he was most wanted, then he was absent from his duty.

The great sun still bathed the village in a flood of light, the fleecy clouds sailed slowly in the azure, the yellow mist hung over the distant hills, and the leaves now and again rustled to the ground. But the chamber that should have resounded with laughter and joy was darkened. One more human leaf had fallen from the earthly tree of life. Once more those that

were left behind were worse off than those that were taken. In the words of the dear old ballad—

> My summer's day, in lusty May,
> Is darked afore the noon.

CHAPTER VI.

A GREAT horror fell upon the whole neighbourhood of World's End. Not the oldest man or woman could remember such a deed in their midst. Hitherto the spectre of Murder had avoided those grand old hills. There was no memory of such a thing. The nearest approach to it, which the gossips at the Shepherd's Bush could recall to mind, had happened long before the days of the oldest of them all.

There was one, and one only, who declared that in his youth his father left him in charge of the hayfield one beautiful summer's day, to go and see a man hung on the gallows. It was the custom then to erect the gallows at, or very near, the spot

where the crime was supposed to have been committed; often at the cross roads.

His father told him—and having heard the tale so often it was still fresh in his memory—that the gallows in this case was built in a narrow lane, close to a gateway, through which the murderer had fired the fatal shot at his victim. The spot was known to that day as Deadman's Gate.

There was an immense crowd collected to witness the execution, and the sun shone brilliantly on the ghastly machine. The murderer, as seems to have been the fashion in those times, at the foot of the gallows declared his innocence; and there were not wanting people who, in despite of the evidence, believed him.

Just after the horrible ceremony was finished, and the lifeless body swung to and fro, there burst a thunderstorm upon the crowd, which scattered in all directions.

Two men took refuge under a tall tree. One said, "This is dangerous," and went

out into the field; before the other could follow he was struck dead by the lightning, so that there were now two corpses.

This man chanced to be one of the principal witnesses against the murderer, and superstition firmly believed that the thunderstorm marked the Divine wrath at the execution of an innocent man.

"The moment before," said the narrator, "the sky was perfectly clear; the storm came without the slightest warning." The fact being that the crowd were so intent upon the spectacle before them that they had not noticed the gathering clouds.

"Ay," concluded the narrator, who evidently shared in the superstition, "it be an awful thing to bear witness about blood. There be them about here as I wouldn't stand in their shoes!"

A dead silence followed. Men understood what he meant. Already public suspicion had fallen upon the gardener.

And Violet? Violet was calm and tear-

less, but heart-broken. She would not see Aymer till the third day—it was the morning of the inquest, though she did not know it. She saw him in her own room, still darkened. A thrush was singing loud and clear in the tree below the window. The sun still shone as it had done upon the bridal day, but the room was dark.

Miss Merton, despite her horror, had remained by her friend. She left the apartment as Aymer entered. Violet could not speak to him. Her head drooped on his shoulder, and convulsive sobs shook her form.

It is better to leave them together. The soiled wedding-dress, the beautiful pearl necklace tinged with the horrible hue of blood, had been carefully put out of sight. People were searching for the wedding ring in the chancel at the church, but could not find it.

The inquest was held at the Shepherd's Bush. As had been the case at another

inquest a century before, held at a place then almost as retired—at Wolf's Glow—so here the jury was formed of the farmers of the district.

Bury Wick village was so small it had no inn, which was accounted for by the fact that no through road ran by it. The village inn was half a mile from the houses, alone by itself, on the edge of the highway. The Shepherd's Bush was small, merely a cottage made into a tavern, and the largest room barely held the jury.

It is not material to us to go into every detail; the main features of that painful inquiry will be sufficient.

The jury having been sworn, proceeded in solemn procession to The Place. They entered noiselessly, not to disturb "Miss Vi'let," for whom the sympathy was heartfelt. They viewed the body of the good old man, cut down at the very hour when the crowning desire of his heart was in the act of realisation.

Such juries usually hurry through their task, shrinking from the view of the dead which the law compels upon them—a miserable duty, and often quite useless. But in this case they lingered in the room.

Saying little or nothing, they collected in groups of two or three around the coffin, wistfully gazing upon the features of the dead. For the features were placid, notwithstanding the terrible wound upon the top of the head. The peace of his life clung to him even in a violent death.

There was not one man there who could remember a single word or deed by which the dead had injured any human being. Quiet, retired, benevolent, largely subscribing in an unostentatious manner to the village charities, ready always with a helping hand to the poor—surely he ought to have been secure? What motive could there be?

They returned to the Shepherd's Bush. The Coroner asked for the evidence of the

person who had last seen the deceased alive. It was at once apparent that numbers had seen him.

Mr. Merton, who attended, self-employed, to watch the case for Violet, and from attachment to his deceased friend—was selected as a representative of the many. He deposed that he had last seen the deceased alive at quarter to eleven on the marriage day, at the moment that the bride took leave of her father, and received his blessing. This simple statement produced a profound impression. The deceased, who little thought that that parting would last for ever, was then sitting as usual in his armchair, which he could wheel about as he chose, close to the open window—almost *in* the window—and as witness escorted the bride to her carriage, he looked back and saw the deceased had partly turned round, so that the back of his head was towards the window. He had then his velvet skullcap off, and witness

believed that he was engaged in silent prayer. This statement also naturally produced a profound effect. The deceased's head was partially bald, and the little hair he had was grey. The day was very warm and sultry.

Mr. Merton paused, and the next witness was the first person who had seen the deceased after the fatal attack. This was the gardener. He appeared in court, visibly shaking, bearing the marks of recent excitement upon his countenance. He was an aged man, clad in corduroys and grey, much-worn coat—not the suit he had worn on the wedding day. His name was Edward Jenkins. His wife pressed hard to be admitted to the court, but was forbidden, and remained without, wringing her hands and sobbing. This witness was much confused, and his answers were difficult to get—not from reluctance to speak, but from excitement and fear. He produced an unfavourable impression upon

the Coroner, which the medical man in court observing, remarked that he had recently attended the witness for heart disease at the request of the deceased, who took a great interest in his old servant. Even this, however, did not altogether succeed—there was an evident feeling against the man.

His evidence, when reduced to writing, was singularly simple, vague, and unsatisfactory. Why had he not gone to the church to see the wedding, as it appeared every single person had done, not even excepting the dog Dando? He had much desired to see the marriage of his young mistress; but being the only man-servant, it was his duty to see to the wines and to the table; and at the time when the carriage started he was in the garden cutting fresh flowers, for the purpose of strewing the lady's footpath when she returned and descended from the carriage, and also to decorate the breakfast table. How long was it after the carriage

started that anything happened? It seemed barely a minute. He was in a remote part of the garden, hastily working, when—almost immediately after the carriage started—he happened to look up, and saw a stranger on the green in front of the house.

"Stay," said the Coroner. "Describe that person."

This he could not do. The glimpse he had caught was obtained through the boughs and branches of several trees and shrubs. He could not say whether the stranger was tall or short, dark or light, or what dress he wore; but he had a vague idea that he had a dirty, grey coat on.

This was an unfortunate remark, for the witness at that moment wore such a coat.

He could not say whether he had a hat or a cap on, nor what colour trousers he wore. The stranger appeared to cross the green diagonally towards the house.

"What did witness do?"

For a moment he did nothing—it did not strike him as anything extraordinary. That morning there had been scores of people about the house, and numbers of strangers whom he did not know. They were attracted by the talk about the wedding, and he thought no harm. He went on with his work as hastily as he could, for he still hoped to have finished in time to make a short cut across the fields, and see a part of the marriage ceremony.

He became so excited with the wish to see the ceremony that he left part of his work undone. As he went he had to pass the open window of the dining-room, where "master" was sitting. He was running, and actually passed the window without noticing anything; but before he had got to the front door he heard a groan. He ran back, and found his master prone on the floor of the apartment, in a pool of blood. He had evidently fallen out of his

armchair forwards—started up and fallen. Witness, excessively frightened, lifted him up, and placed him in the chair, and it was in so doing that his shirt-front became saturated with the sanguinary stream, which also dyed his hands. He had on a shirt-front and a black suit, in order to wait at table at the wedding breakfast. "Master" never spoke or groaned again. So soon as he was placed in the armchair his head dropped on one side as if quite dead, and witness then ran as fast as he could to the church, and crossed the fields by a short cut which brought him to the chancel-door.

The stranger, who had crossed the narrow "green" or lawn before the house, had entirely disappeared, and he saw nothing of him in the house. In his haste and confusion, he did not see with what the deed had been committed.

This was the substance of his evidence. Cross-examine him as they might, neither

the Coroner nor the jury, nor Mr. Merton, could get any further light. The witness was evidently much perturbed. There were those who thought his manner that of a guilty man—or, at least, of a man who knew more than he chose to tell. On the other hand, it might be the manner of an aged and weakly man, greatly upset in mind and body by the frightful discovery he had made. All the jury knew the relations between the witness and the deceased. Jenkins had lived in the service of the Waldrons all his life, as had his father before him, and the deceased had always exhibited the greatest interest in his welfare. He had good wages, an easy occupation, and was well cared for in every way. The most suspicious could conceive of no ground of quarrel or ill-will.

The Coroner directed the witness to remain in attendance, and the first person who had seen the deceased after the alarm was given was called.

This was Phillip Lewis, a farmer's son (one of the stewards at World's End Races), who being swift of foot had outstripped the others in the run from the church to The Place.

Phillip Lewis found the deceased in his arm-chair, with his head drooping on one side—just as the gardener Jenkins described; only this witness at once caught sight of the weapon with which the fatal blow was given. It was lying on the ground, just outside the open window, stained with blood, and was now produced by the constable who had taken charge of it. It was a small bill-hook, not so large as would be used in cutting hedges, but much the same shape.

The edge of a bill-hook, as every one knows, curves inward like a sickle, and at the end the blade forms a sharp point, or spike. It is, therefore, a fearful instrument with which to deliver a blow upon a bare head.

Phillip Lewis said that the gardener Jenkins recognised this hook as his—the one he usually employed to lop the yew trees, and other favourite trees of the deceased, and for general work in the shrubberies.

This piece of evidence made the jury look very sternly upon Jenkins. He was asked if it was his, and at once admitted it. Where had he left it last? He would not be quite sure, but he believed in the tool-house, which was close to the gate in the garden wall, which led out into the fields. He had used it that morning.

There was a distinct movement among the jury. They evidently began to suspect Jenkins.

The medical man, Dr. Parker, was the last witness. He had examined the wound the deceased had received. There was first an incised wound, three inches long, on the top of the skull, extending along the very crown of the head. This wound

was not deep, and, though serious, might not have proved mortal. At the end of this wound there was a small space not cut at all, but an inch farther, just at the top of the forehead, was a deep wound, which had penetrated to the brain, and must have caused almost instantaneous death.

These peculiar wounds were precisely such as would have been made if a person had approached the deceased from behind, and struck him on the bare head with the bill-hook produced. He did not think that there was more than one blow. He thought that the deceased when he received the blow must have started up mechanically, and, losing power, fell forward on to the floor. He did not think that the deceased had suffered much pain. There would not be time. The point or spike-like end of the hook had stuck deep into the brain. He had examined the hook, and found clotted gore and a few grey hairs upon the blade.

This concluded the evidence, and the

court was cleared—after the Coroner had whispered a few words to the police, several members of which force were present.

The Coroner then summed up the evidence, and in a few brief but terribly powerful sentences pointed out that suspicion could only attach to one man. This man was left alone. He had every opportunity. The tale of the alleged stranger on the lawn bore every mark of being apocryphal. It was obviously a clumsy invention. The witness, who at first could not give any idea whatever as to how the stranger was dressed, had, when pressed, in a manner identified himself as the stranger, by describing him as wearing a grey coat.

In conclusion, he would add that the country had been scoured by the police in the three days that had elapsed, and they had failed to find any trace of the supposed stranger. He then left the jury to deliberate, and going out into the air, met Mr.

Merton, who was more firmly convinced than the Coroner as to the guilt of Jenkins.

"There was no motive," he admitted, as they talked it over, walking slowly down the road; "but crimes were not always committed from apparent motives. On the contrary, out of ten such crimes seven would, if investigated, seem to be committed from very inadequate motives. How could they tell that Waldron had not called to the gardener *after* the carriage had left, and that then a quarrel took place?" He was determined to see that justice was done to his dead friend.

But while the Coroner and Merton thus strolled along together a new complexion had been put upon affairs. The wretched wife of Jenkins, who had heard the muttered communications of the police, and saw that they kept a close look-out upon her husband, had listened as near the door as she could get, and so heard the summing-up of the Coroner. Distracted and out of

her mind with terror, a resource occurred to her that would never have been thought of by one less excited. She rushed from the place like mad. "Poor old Sally has lost her head," said the hangers about. She ran across the fields, scrambled through the hedges, reached The Place, tore upstairs, and threw herself upon Violet, beseeching her for the love of God to save her poor husband.

Till that moment Violet had not the least idea that Jenkins, who had carried her in his arms many a time when she was a child, and was more like an old friend than a servant, was under any suspicion. She rose up at once and went downstairs, the first time since the wedding-day. Aymer and Miss Merton tried to stay her.

"Hush!" she said; "it is my duty."

She was obliged to pass the fatal window; she burst into tears, but hurried on. Aymer went with her, and assisted her along the very same route that Sally had come—over

ditches and through the gaps in the hedges. Violet reached the Shepherd's Bush bare-headed, panting. Involuntarily, the crowd hanging about, one and all, boors that they were, took off their hats. She knocked at the door where the jury sat; astounded, they admitted her. Strung up to the highest pitch she burst upon them, cowed them, overcame them.

"He is innocent!" she cried, in the full tones of her beautiful voice. "He is innocent; let him go free! He served the dead for fifty years; they never quarrelled; they were like old friends, not master and man. I am the daughter of the dead. I tell you with my whole heart and soul that that man *must* be innocent; if you injure him, it is you who are murderers!"

She turned and left the room; many started forward to help her, but she clung to Aymer's arm and he got her home as quickly as he might.

It was a noble thing. It was a truly

great spectacle to see that young girl standing there and defending the poor fellow upon whom cruel suspicion had fallen, notwithstanding her own irreparable loss. Its effect upon the jury was immediate and irremovable. They were silent for a time. Then one after another found twenty loopholes of doubt where before they had been so positive. After all, why should not the gardener's story be true? It was a simple, artless tale; not one that would be concocted.

One juryman, who had served on the jury at the Quarter Sessions, remembered a great counsel in some important case laying it down as an axiom, that if a man made up a story to defend himself it was always too complete, too full of detail. Said the juryman: "If Jenkins had made up his story, he would have told us what the stranger wore, what colour hat, what sort of trousers, and every particular. There was a total absence of motive. Jenkins was a quiet, inoffensive man, whom they had all known

for years and years. Very likely, indeed, for strangers to come to The Place on that day, the fame of which had been talked of everywhere. Perhaps the fellow wished to steal the plate on the breakfast-table, and was surprised to find the invalid there. Hearing the gardener coming, he would make off at once, which accounted for the fact that not a single thing was stolen. Why should they condemn one of their own parish on such trivial evidence?" This was the right key, the *local* one.

When the Coroner was at last called in, he was astounded at the verdict delivered to him by the foreman—"Wilful murder against a person, or persons, unknown." He argued with them, but in vain; the twelve had made up their minds and were firm as a rock. He had to submit with a bad grace.

Poor Sally had a moment of joy, and clasped her husband's neck, but it was of brief duration. A minute afterwards the

police sergeant present tapped Jenkins on the shoulder, and took him in custody on a charge of murder.

This is the peculiarity of the law in such cases. A suspected person has to run the gauntlet of two bodies—first, the coroner's jury; next, the magistrates. Many a wretch who has escaped the one has been trapped by the other to his doom.

The handcuffs were slipped on the gardener's wrists and he was led away unresistingly, followed by his weeping wife and a crowd of the villagers.

As the jury emerged from the Shepherd's Bush, which was not till afternoon—for they had stayed to spend their ninepenny fees—there struck on their ears a mournful sound. It was the tolling of the village bell. The medical man had recommended immediate interment. Only three days before those bells had merrily rung for the daughter's bridal; now they tolled for the father's burial. They hastened to the church and

watched the solemn ceremony. The low broken voice of the vicar failed at the words, as they stood by the open vault—"He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow. . . . In the midst of life we are in death;" and the rest of the service was nearly inaudible.

CHAPTER VII.

EVERY one knows what a dull monotony of sorrow succeeds to a great loss. Perhaps it was fortunate for Violet that her mind was in some small measure withdrawn from too consuming grief by the unfortunate position of the poor old gardener. Over the very grave of the dead, as it were, she quarrelled—the word is hardly too strong—with Merton.

Mr. Merton was bitter against Jenkins. His professional mind, always ready to put the worst aspect upon anything, quick to suspect and slow to relinquish an idea, was convinced of the gardener's guilt. In his zeal for the memory of his poor friend, he forgot that he might be injuring an innocent man. He even went so far as to speak

strongly to Violet about her visit to the jury. Surely she should have been the last to protect the murderer. He said something like this in the heat of his temper, and regretted it afterwards. It was cruel, unjust, and inconsiderate. Violet simply left the room and refused to see him.

Merton left the house in a rage, and resolved to spare nothing to convict the miserable gardener. Now this quarrel produced certain events—it set on foot another chain of circumstances. Violet was now alone at The Place. Miss Merton could not stay longer. Before she went she asked if she should send back the dog Dando, which Merton had taken to Barnham. Violet, still bitter, in an unreasoning way, against the dog, said no.

"Then," said Miss Merton, "may I take him with me to Torquay?"

She had taken a fancy to the dog. Violet was quite willing—anything so that he did not return to vex her with memories of the

dead. Miss Merton took him home, sorry for her friend, and yet glad to quit that dismal house and neighbourhood.

Next day there came a note from Mr. Merton, in which the writer, in a formal way, expressed regret if he had uttered anything which had annoyed her, and asked her to accompany Miss Merton to Torquay for change of scene. Violet thanked him, but refused.

Aymer saw her every day. She did not give way to tears and fits of excited sorrow, but a dull weakness seemed to have taken possession of her. All the old spirit and joy had left her. She wandered about listlessly, stunned, in fact. All the interest she took was in poor Jenkins' fate. Aymer, at her wish, went to Barnham, and engaged a lawyer to defend him. This soon reached Merton's ears, and annoyed him exceedingly; though, to do him justice, he was at that very hour striving to put Violet's affairs into order.

Those affairs were—unknown to her—in a most critical state. The deceased, as he had told Aymer, had three thousand pounds out at interest, as he believed, upon good security, but which he thought of calling in. This money had been advanced to a Mr. Joseph Herring, a large farmer at Belthrop, some ten miles from World's End.

Mr. Herring was a successful man and a good man; at all events he had no worse failing than an inordinate love of fox-hunting. He had a large family, six sons and eight daughters, but there always seemed to be plenty for them. They lived and dressed well, rode out to the Meet, and one by one, as the sons grew older, they were placed in farms. Fox-hunting men, with the reputation of some means, can always find favour in the eyes of landlords. If any one had been asked to point out a fortunate family in that county, he would at once have placed his finger upon the name of Herring.

The original home farm, where dwelt old Herring and his wife, four of the daughters, and one son, who really managed it, was of good size, fertile, and easily rented. The eldest son, Albert Herring, who was married and had children, occupied a fine farm at no great distance; and the two other sons had a smaller farm between them, and with them lived the other four sisters. Of course it was understood that these farms had been stocked partly with borrowed money; but that was a common thing, and there was every indication that all the family were prospering.

It was to this Joseph Herring that Mr. Waldron had advanced three thousand pounds, taking ample security, as was believed, upon stock, and upon a small estate which belonged to Herring's wife. Merton recommended this Herring as a client of his, and conducted the operation. Waldron had given Merton notice that he wished to withdraw the money; but Merton, not

thinking there was any hurry, had not mentioned it to Joseph, when there came this awful catastrophe at World's End and drove the matter entirely out of his head. But his attention was drawn back to it in an equally sudden manner. Old Joseph Herring, the foxhunter, while out with the hounds, put his horse at a double mound where there appeared to be a gap. This gap had been caused by cutting down an elm tree, and he imagined that the trunk had been removed.

The morning had been cold, and although the ground was not hard there had been what is called a "duck's frost" in places. The horse's hoofs slipped upon the level butt of the tree, which had been sawn off; the animal fell heavily, and upon his side.

In all probability, even then he would not have been much injured—for falls in the hunting field are as common as blackberries—had it not been for the trunk of the elm tree. His back, in some way, came against and

across the trunk with the weight of the horse upon him, and the spine was broken. He was carried home upon a hurdle, still living, and quite conscious.

A more terrible spectacle could not be conceived than this strong burly man lying upon his bed, conscious, and speaking at times faintly, without a visible wound, and yet with the certainty of death.

His sons and daughters gathered round him; all were at hand except the eldest, Albert, and he was sent for. Joseph, who had seen too many accidents not to know he was doomed, even if it had not been visible upon the faces of his wife and children, betrayed the greatest uneasiness. He kept asking for "Albert" and for "Merton." Messenger after messenger was despatched after both, and still they did not come.

Merton, when the messenger reached him, was in the Petty Sessional Court at Barnham, watching the preliminary proceedings against poor Jenkins, which happened to

take place that day. He was much excited.

The lawyer whom Aymer had engaged to defend Jenkins was a professional rival—a keen and clever man, and he had so worked up the case, and suggested so many doubts and probabilities that the Bench of magistrates hesitated to commit him.

It was in the thick of the fight that the messenger from the death-bed arrived. Will it be believed, so great was the professional rivalry between these men, and so determined was Merton to succeed in committing poor Jenkins, that he paused, he hesitated, finally he waited till the case was finished.

"After all," he said to himself, "very likely the accident to Joseph is much exaggerated —people always lose their heads at such times. At all events his neck's not broken, and he's alive; the messenger doesn't know exactly where he's hurt. There's no particular hurry."

But it so happened that there *was* a par-

ticular cause for hurry. While Merton persuaded himself that he was looking after the cause of his murdered friend and revenging him, that friend's dearest one—his Violet—was fast losing her patrimony. Even when the second messenger came with more exact intelligence, Merton thought—"Sometimes men lie for days with broken backs, and what does he want me for? His will is made; I've got it in my office, and a very just will it is. All his affairs are arranged, I believe. It's all fuss and fidget."

However, he ordered his carriage to wait at the door of the Court, and half an hour afterwards the Bench reappeared.

The Chairman said that although there was very little evidence against the prisoner Jenkins, although his character had been proved excellent, and although his solicitor had most ably conducted the defence, yet the Bench felt that the crime was one too serious for them to think of dismissing a suspected person. The prisoner would be

committed for trial at the Assizes, which fortunately for him came on that day fortnight.

A smile of triumph lit up Merton's face as he gathered up his papers. The rival solicitor smiled too, and assured Aymer, who was present to tell Violet what happened, that the grand jury would be certain to throw out the bill. There was not a tittle of evidence against the prisoner.

With this assurance Aymer mounted and rode back to Violet. At the same time Merton, telling his coachman not to distress the horses, drove leisurely towards the death-bed, where he had been so anxiously expected for hours.

The scene at that death-bed was extremely dreadful. The poor dying man gradually became more and more restless and excited; nor could all the efforts of Dr. Parker, the persuasions of the clergyman, nor the tears of his wife and children, keep him calm.

The thought of death—the idea of pre-

paring for the hereafter never seemed to occur to him. His one wish was to see "Albert" and "Merton;" till feverish and his eye glittering with excitement, all that he could ejaculate was those two names.

He remained for four hours quite conscious, and able to converse; then suddenly there was a change, and he lost the power of answering questions, though still faintly repeating those names. The scene was very shocking.

"Why doesn't Albert come?" said poor Mrs. Herring. "He might have been here two hours ago. If Merton would not, Albert, my son, might have come."

What do you suppose Albert was doing at that moment? It is incredible, but it is true. He was in the field superintending the placing of two new steam ploughing engines and their tackle, watching the trial of the new engines, as they tore up the soil with the deep plough. They had arrived that morning, just purchased; and had it

not been for their coming, he would have been in the hunting-field with his father when the accident happened.

He could not, or would not, leave his engines. He busied about with them—now riding himself upon the plough, now watching the drivers of the engines, now causing experiments to be made with the scarifier. He paid little attention to the first messenger. "Tell them I'll be there," he said. Another and another messenger, still Albert remained with his plough.

"He asks for me, does he?" he said. "I'll be there directly." Still he made no haste. After quitting the engines he went out of his path to visit a flock of fat sheep, and putting up a covey of partridges in the stubble, stayed to mark them down.

At the house he calmly refreshed himself with cheese and ale. As he mounted his horse another messenger came, this time with a note from Dr. Parker. Albert mounted with much bustle, and made off at a

gallop. Two miles on the way he pulled up to a walk, met his shepherd, and had a talk with him about the ewes; then the farrier on his nag, and described to him the lameness of a carthorse. All this time his father lay dying. Strange and unaccountable indifference!

Merton reached Belthrop Farm first, and was too late. Joseph Herring was dead. He had died without even so much as listening to the words of the clergyman—yet he had to all appearance been a good, and even pious man while in health. Why was he so strangely warped upon his death-bed?

"Oh! Albert—Albert, my son, my son! Why did you linger?" cried poor Mrs. Herring as he entered.

"Father?" said Albert, questioningly.

She shook her head.

"Ah!" said the son; and it sounded like a sigh of relief.

Let the grief for the dead be never so great, there quickly follows the common-

place realities of money and affairs to be settled.

The dead man's will was read by Merton. It was a fair and just will. Next came the investigation into his effects, and then came the revelation. Joseph Herring left no effects. This discovery fell upon his wife, three of the sons, and all the daughters, like a thunderbolt. They had always believed they should be left tolerably provided for. But when all the debts were paid there would not be a ten-pound note.

They began to murmur, and to question, as well they might. What had become of the three thousand pounds Herring had had of Waldron? They did not know that their father had borrowed so much as that; they knew there was a loan from Waldron, but never suspected the amount.

Merton, hard as it was, felt that he must draw that money in; and who was to pay it? Why, there were no effects whatever. To pay the other debts would take all the money

that could be got, and part of the stock must be sold even then.

But this three thousand pounds. To make that good all the stock, the corn, the implements—everything would have to be sold; including Mrs. Herring's little estate, and the small sums that had been advanced to the two sons who lived on one farm must be withdrawn. It was complete ruin; ruin without reserve.

They were literally stunned, and knew not which way to turn. They could not understand, neither could Merton, what had become of the three thousand pounds; there was not a scrap of paper to show. Joseph had never been a good accountant—few farmers are; but one would have thought that he would have preserved some record of such a sum. But no—not a scrap.

Then, as said before, these children began to murmur, as well they might. Then they began to understand, or guess dimly at the extraordinary excitement of the dying man.

It was this that weighed upon his mind, and caused him to continually call for his eldest son and for Merton, in order that he might make some provision.

There grew up a certain feeling against Albert. Why had he not come at once—if he had done so, perhaps this might have been averted. A vague distrust and suspicion of him arose. It was intensified by the knowledge that he alone was safe. He had had a longer start and a better farm; he had the reputation of having even saved a little money. No injury could befall him. Yet they had not got the slightest evidence against him in any way; but a coolness—a decided coolness arose between the brothers and sisters, and Albert, which Albert, on his part, made no effort to remove. Ill-natured people said he was only too glad to quarrel with them, so as to have a pretext for refusing them assistance.

It happened, however, that one day a strange gentleman called upon Robert and

John, the two brothers, who worked one farm together. He was an agent of an agricultural implement manufactory in a distant county, and his object was to induce them to purchase implements of him—especially steam traction engines. The poor brothers smiled in a melancholy way at the very idea. They buy engines—they should soon scarcely be able to buy bread! The agent expressed his surprise.

"But your brother seems a wealthy man," he said. "He paid for his engines in cash."

"In cash!" they cried. "He told us that he paid one-fifth only, and the rest remained in bills."

The agent saw he had got on delicate ground; but they pressed him, and he could not very well escape. It then came out that Albert had paid sixteen hundred pounds in hard cash for the engines, by which, as the factory had been pressed for money, he got them at little more than

two-thirds of the value, which was considered to be two thousand three hundred pounds.

The brothers were simply astounded. They went home and talked it over with the fourth son, who managed the Belthrop Farm. They could not understand how Albert came to have so much ready cash. At last the conclusion forced itself upon them—the three thousand pounds borrowed from Waldron must have been lent by their father to Albert. They remembered that something had been said of an opening Albert had heard of, to add another farm to his already large tenancy.

This was the secret—poor old Joseph, a bad accountant, had given the money to Albert, and, never thinking of dying, had postponed drawing up the proper deeds. Without a moment's delay they proceeded in a body to Albert's residence. He received them in an off-hand manner—utterly denied that he had had the money, chal-

lenged them to find the proof, and finally threatened if they set such a tale about the county to prosecute them for slander. This was too much.

It is wretched to chronicle these things; but they must be written. High words were followed by blows; there was a fight between the eldest and the next in succession, and both being strong men, they were much knocked about. The other brothers, maddened with their loss, actually cheered on their representative, and stripped to take his place as soon as he should be fatigued. But at that moment poor old Mrs. Joseph Herring, who had feared this, arrived, driving up in a pony carriage, and sprang between the combatants. She received a severe blow, but she separated them, and they parted with menacing gestures.

Once back at Belthrop, a kind of family council was held. Merton was sent for, but nothing could be done. There was not a scrap of proof that Albert had had the

money. Mrs. Joseph went to him, reasoned with him, entreated him. He turned a deaf ear to her remonstrances, and cursed her to her face. The miserable woman returned to her despairing younger children, and never recovered the terrible blow which the selfish, and inhuman conduct of her eldest son had inflicted upon her. Ruin stared them in the face. Waldron's loan was due, and everything was already advertised for sale.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW suddenly the leaves go in the autumn! They linger on the trees till we almost cheat ourselves into the belief that we shall escape the inevitable winter; that for once the inexorable march of events will be stayed, till some morning we wake up and look forth, and lo! a wind has arisen, and the leaves are gone.

Absorbed in the one miserable topic—the one thought of Waldron's terrible fate—Violet and Aymer spent several weeks almost unconsciously. When at last they, as it were, woke up and looked forth, the actual tangible leaves upon the trees had disappeared, and, like them, the green leaves of their lives had been shaken down and had perished.

Even yet they had one consolation—they had themselves. The catastrophe that had happened at the very eleventh hour, at the moment when their affection and their hope was about to be realised, after all had only drawn them closer together. She was more dependent upon him than ever. There was no kind Jason to fly to now; the resources he could command were gone for ever. Had Aymer been as selfish as he was unselfish, that very fact would not have been without its pleasure. She could come to him only now in trouble, and she did come to him.

It may be that all that happy summer which they had spent together, strolling about, sketching under the beech and fir; all that happy winter, with its music and song; all the merry spring, with its rides, had not called forth such deep and abiding love between these two as was brought into existence by these weeks of sorrow, the first frosts of their year. They were constantly together; they were both orphans now;

they had nothing but themselves. It was natural that they should grow all in all to each other.

There was one subject that was never alluded to between them, and that was the interrupted marriage. It was too painful for Violet, too delicate a subject for Aymer to mention. It was in both their minds, yet neither spoke of it. They were, and they were not, married. In a sense—in the sense of the publication of the banns; in the sense of the public procession to the church, the sanction of friends, the presence of the people—in this sense they were married. But the words "I will" had never left Violet's lips, however willing they were to utter the phrase; and, above all, the ring had never been placed upon her finger. Nor could that ring be found. They were half married.

It was a strange and exceptional case, perhaps unequalled. Morally, Violet felt that she was his; legally, Aymer feared

that she was not his. He feared it, because he knew that it would be impossible to persuade Violet to undergo the ceremony a second time, till the memory of that dreadful day had softened and somewhat faded. It might be months, perhaps years. The disappointment to him was almost more than he could bear. To be so near, to have the prize within his reach, and then to be dashed aside with the merciless hand of fate.

It would not be well that the ancient belief in destiny should again bear sway in our time; it is contrary to the thought of the period, and yet hourly, daily, weekly, all our lives, we seem to move, and live, and have our being amidst circumstances that march on and on, and are utterly beyond our power to control or guide. "Circumstances beyond my power to control" is a household phrase—we hear it at the hearth, on the mart, in the council-chamber. And what *are* circumstances? Why are these

apparently trivial things out of our power? Why do they perpetually evolve other circumstances, till a chain forms itself—a net, a web—as visible, and as tangible, as if it had been actually woven by the three sisters of antique mythology.

The unseen, awful, inscrutable *necessity* which, heedless alike of gods and men, marches with irresistible tread through the wonderful dramas of Sophocles, seems to have survived the twilight of the gods, survived the age of miracles and supernatural events. Of all that the ancients venerated and feared, necessity alone remains a factor in modern life. What can our brightest flashes of intelligence, our inventions, our steam engine and telegraph, effect when confronted with those "circumstances over which we have no control?" It is our nineteenth-century euphuism for the Fate of the ancient world.

It is not well that we should scrutinise too closely the state of poor Aymer's mind.

His joy and elation before that terrible day were too great not for the fall to be felt severely. The iron of it entered into his soul. For one moment he almost hoped against hope.

The clergyman who had officiated at the interrupted bridal came daily to see Violet, and his true piety, his quiet parental manner, soothed and comforted her. He whispered to Aymer that it would be well if the marriage ceremony were completed in private, as could be done by special licence.

Aymer naturally grasped at the idea. He had still twenty pounds left of the gift which had been sent to him anonymously. He was eager to spend it upon the special licence, but he confessed that he dared not mention it to Violet.

The vicar undertook that task, but failed completely. Violet begged him to spare her—to desist; she could not—not yet.

After that day she was more and more

tender and affectionate to Aymer, as if to make up to him for his loss. She said that he must take heart—they had no need to be unhappy. In a little while, but not yet—not yet, while that fearful vision was still floating before her eyes. But Aymer must be happy. They had sufficient. *He* had left them all he had. That was another reason why they should wait, in affection for his memory. They could see each other daily—their future would be together. And Aymer, miserable as he was, was forced to be content.

Merton had not been to The Place. Not one word had he said about the difficulty in Herring's affairs, and the loss of the three thousand pounds. Violet was utterly ignorant that her fortune was gone. She spoke very bitterly of Merton. "If he had loved poor papa," she said, "he would never have persecuted his faithful servant," for nothing could shake her belief in Jenkins' innocence, and she did all

she could to comfort the poor gardener's desolate wife.

Merton, on his part, did not care to approach her after the share he had had in the commitment of Jenkins, and because he hesitated, he dreaded to face her, and to tell her that her fortune, entrusted to his hands, was gone. He blamed himself greatly, and yet he would not own it. He ought to have hastened to Herring's deathbed. Had that dying man but left one written word, to say that Albert had had the money, all would have been well.

In the fierce attempt to revenge his old friend, he had irreparably injured that friend's daughter, and he dreaded the inevitable disclosure. He put it off till the last, hoping against hope, and doing all that his lawyer's ingenuity could suggest to recover some part of the amount. In endeavouring to succeed in this, he pressed hard—very hard—upon the Herring family. He pushed them sorely, and spared not.

He was bitterly exasperated against them. Unjustly, he openly accused them of a plot to rob his client and dishonour him.

He abused the dead man as one who had repented too late upon his death-bed. He would take everything—down to the smallest article. Neither the persuasions of the sons, the tears of the daughters, nor the silent despair of the widow could move him. Of all this Violet knew nothing.

It happened that one evening not long after the lamp had been lit at The Place, that there was heard a slight tapping or knocking at the front door. Now, this door was close to the window where the terrible deed had been committed. By this door the bride had stepped forth in all her gay attire; by this door the corpse of her father had been carried forth. Villagers, and all isolated people, are superstitious; the beliefs of those days, when all people were more isolated than they are now, linger amongst them. By common consent, this

door was avoided by day and night. A dread destiny seemed to hang over those who passed beneath its portal. It had been kept locked since the funeral—no one had used it.

Violet and Aymer, sitting in the breakfast-parlour—which was the most comfortable room in the house—were reading, and looked up mutually at the sound of those unwonted knocks. They listened. There was a pause; and then the taps were repeated. They were so gentle, so muffled, that they doubted the evidence of their ears—and yet surely it was a knocking.

The servants in the kitchen heard the taps, and they cowered over the fire and looked fearfully at each other.

One thing was certain—no person who knew The Place, no one from the village, would come to that door. If it was any mortal man or woman, it must be a stranger; and the last time a stranger had crossed the "green," all knew what had happened. If

it was not a stranger, then it must be the spirit of poor "master." They were determined not to hear.

The taps were repeated. Violet and Aymer looked at each other.

Something very like a moan penetrated into the apartment. Aymer immediately rose and went to the front door. He asked if any one was without; there was no answer. He opened the door; the bitter wind, bearing with it flakes of snow, drove into his face. For a moment, in the darkness, he could distinguish nothing; the next, brave as he was, he recoiled; for there lay what looked like a body at his feet. Overcoming his dread he stooped and touched —a woman's dress. He lifted her up—the form was heavy and inanimate in his hands.

"Violet, dear!" he said, "it is a woman —she has fainted; may I bring her in?"

Violet's sympathies were at once on the alert. The woman was carried in and laid

upon the rug before the fire, the servants came crowding in to render assistance, brandy was brought, and the stranger opened her eyes and moaned faintly. Then they saw that, although stained with travel and damp from exposure to the drifting snow, her dress was that of a lady.

Under the influence of the warm fire and the brandy she soon recovered sufficiently to sit up. She was not handsome nor young; her best features were a broad, intellectual-looking forehead, and fine dark eyes. So soon as ever she was strong enough to speak she turned to Violet, and begged to be alone with her for a little while.

Aymer, with all a lover's suspicions, demurred, but Violet insisted, and he had to be content with remaining within easy call.

He had no sooner left the room than the lady, for such she appeared to be, fell upon her knees at Violet's feet, and begged her for the sake of her father's memory to show mercy.

"Oh! spare us," cried the unhappy creature, bursting into tears, and wringing her hands, "spare us—we are penniless. Indeed we did not do it purposely. We never knew—I am Esther Herring!"

It was long before Violet could gather her meaning from these incoherent sentences. At last, under her kind words and gentle questions, Esther became calmer and explained the miserable state of affairs. Violet sighed deeply. In one moment her hopes were dashed to the ground: her money was gone; how could she and Aymer——

But she bore up bravely, and listened patiently to Esther's story. How the widow's heart was breaking, how the sons were despairing, and the daughters looking forward to begging their bread. How the sale approached—only five days more; and that thinking, and thinking day and night over the misery of it, Esther had at last fled to Violet for mercy—to Violet, who was ignorant of the whole matter. Fled on foot

—for all their horses were seized—on that wild winter afternoon, facing the bitter wind, the snow, and the steep hills for ten long miles to World's End. Fled to fling herself at Violet's feet, and beg for mercy upon the widow and the fatherless children. The fatigue and her excitement had proved too much, and she had fainted at the very door. Esther dwelt much upon Mr. Merton's cruelty, for his insults had cut her to the quick.

Violet became very pale. She went to the door and called softly, "Aymer." He came, and Esther attempted to dry her tears. Violet told him all, and took his hand.

"This cannot be," she said; "this surely must not be. I will do—we will do—as of a surety my father would have done. The innocent shall not suffer for the guilty. We, Aymer and I, will give up our claim. Tell them at your home to be comforted and to fear not."

Esther saw that her mission was accomplished, and the reaction set in. She became ill and feverish. Violet had her taken upstairs and waited upon her. Aymer was left alone. He walked to the window, opened the shutters, and looked forth. The scud flew over the sky, and the wan moon was now hidden, and now shone forth with a pale feeble light. The heart within him was very bitter. He did not repent the renunciation which he had confirmed; he felt that it was right and just. But it was a terrible blow. It cut away the very ground from beneath his feet.

The poor fellow—he was poor Aymer again now—looked forward to the future. What could he do? The talents he possessed were useless, or nearly useless, in a pecuniary sense. Unable to earn sufficient to support himself, how could he marry Violet? The thought was maddening. To continue in the old, old life at Wick Farm without a prospect was impossible. To wander a

beggar from door to door would be preferable. When he found that Violet could not leave Esther, he walked home to Wick Farm; over the wild and open Downs, and his heart went up in a great and bitter cry.

The blow that had struck down poor Waldron had struck him down also. It is ever thus with evil. The circle widens, and no man knows where it will end. Yet he did not falter.

Next day Violet wrote a curt letter to Mr. Merton, requesting him to forbear proceedings, and upbraiding him for his cruelty. She desired that he would relinquish the charge of her affairs.

Merton, had he so chosen, might have made a difficulty about this—under the will of Waldron—but he did not. He was, to say truth, glad of a pretext to wash his hands of a matter in which he had figured so ill.

Violet sent for the same solicitor who had defended Jenkins, Mr. Broughton, and

desired him to see that proceedings were stayed. The Herrings were saved. Esther was sent home in the pony-carriage with the good tidings. Other debts, unsuspected before, ate up most of the effects of Joseph Herring. The widow's little property had to be sold to meet them. With the trifle that was left they removed to the farm where the two brothers worked together, and by dint of careful management escaped starvation. Neither were they unhappy, for misfortune and a common injury bound them closer together—all but the widow, who never overcame the duplicity of her eldest son.

Their conduct towards Violet appears extremely selfish, but it must be remembered that Waldron had borne the reputation of being a rich man. They never dreamt that they had taken Violet's all. But so it was. The dear, dear ponies had to be sold, the servants dismissed; Violet could not keep the house on, and in that

isolated position it was difficult to let it, even at a nominal rent.

Her friends in London made no sign. She had been a favoured guest while Waldron lived and was reputed wealthy. Now they had lost sight of her.

To Aymer all this was as gall and wormwood. It was a comment upon his own weakness, and impotency to aid the only one he loved. He wrote, he sketched; but now with the strange inconsistency of fortune these works were returned, as "not up to the standard required." Perhaps his misfortunes affected his skilfulness. He knew not which way to turn. At home—if Wick Farm could be called home—the old state of things began to gradually return. The old covert sneers and hints at his uselessness crept again into the daily conversation. Martin, like Hercules—

> Rude, unrefined in speech,
> Judging all wisdom by its last results,

looked upon him as a failure, and treated

him accordingly. To do the young men justice, those who had formerly taunted him now never lost an opportunity of expressing their regret. Poor Aymer felt this worse than their sneers and gibes. He had the fault of pride, and yet he depreciated himself habitually. He was punished severely for his brief period of elation. What hurt him most was his helplessness to aid Violet. And Violet, noble girl! was calm, resigned, fearless in her trust—strong in her love of Aymer.

But the inevitable approached—"the circumstances over which we have no control." The day was coming when she must go, and go—whither?

CHAPTER IX.

OWN to one firm faith in this day of scepticism and cynicism. It may be a despicable weakness—that cannot be helped—but nothing will ever overthrow it. My faith is firm in the good which is possible in woman.

There is much vice, much evil, much folly; but, after all, these faults are chiefly caused by weakness, therefore they are more or less excusable. It is difficult for women to do good—so many and so complex are the restraints which surround them as in a net—yet they do it. Were I in sorrow, in trouble, or in fear, to them I should go, as hundreds—aye, countless numbers—have previously gone, certain of assistance if assistance were possible, and of com-

passion and sympathy, even if my crimes were too evil to speak of.

There was heard one afternoon at The Place the roll of carriage-wheels—a sound that had not been heard since the fatal bridal day. It was a damp, cold day, and Violet had been unable to go out. A fog hung over the fields, creeping slowly along the fallows, clinging in shapeless clouds upon the hill tops. There was no rain, but the bare hedges were dripping large drops of water condensed from the mist, and the dead leaves upon the ground were soddened with damp. On such days as these, when she could not walk out and dispel her gloom by exercise, Violet naturally felt the loss of poor Jason the more.

Aymer could not be always with her. Although their intercourse was little, if at all, fettered by the etiquette which would have barred it in more civilised neighbourhoods, yet he could not be always at The Place, and of late he had been working

hard at sketches and literary matters, which occupied time and kept him from her side.

She was very lonely, longing for the evening, when he would be certain to come. The roll of these carriage-wheels was therefore an event. Looking from the window upstairs—that very window whence, in all the splendour of her beauty and her wedding-dress, she had timidly glanced forth to watch the approach of the greys—she saw a stylish brougham rapidly nearing the house, and as it came nearer recognised the horses, and knew it was Lady Lechester's.

Agnes, not waiting for the footman to announce her visit, sprang out, and walked at once to the front door. Once more there came a tapping at that dread portal.

Conquering her fluttering heart, Violet, in a maze of bewilderment, opened it herself. Agnes held out her hand, and kissed her twice upon the cheek and forehead.

"Forgive me!" she said. "Forgive me for coming so soon after——. But I wanted to see you; I had much to say to you."

Violet began to thank her in a confused way for the pearl necklace. Agnes stopped her; it was not that—it was about Violet herself that she had come to talk. Even in her surprise and confusion, Violet could not help thinking that Agnes was very beautiful. It was a species of beauty that was precisely the opposite of Violet's. Both gained by the contrast of the other's style.

Agnes Lechester was at least thirty—she might have been a year or two older—and there hovered over her countenance an indefinable air of melancholy, as if the memory of a past sorrow was for ever before her mind. There was not a wrinkle, not a groove upon her pale brow, but the impress of pain was none the less unmistakable upon her features. Her hair was very dark, as near as possible to the raven's hue, so

often spoken of, so rarely seen. Her eyes were large and grey, deep-set under delicate eyebrows, well-marked, and slightly arching. Her forehead high and intellectual. The features, the nose and mouth, were small and well-made, the ears especially delicate. High blood and long descent spoke out clearly in her every aspect, down even to the quiet subdued manner—the exquisite tact, and consideration for others, which distinguished her in conversation and in daily life.

She was about the same height as Violet, but appeared taller, being more slightly made. She wore a simple black-silk, extremely plain, and one mourning-ring—no other jewellery.

Violet, whose position was not a little embarrassing, found herself in a few moments entirely at her ease, and conversing as with an old friend. Agnes did not in a direct manner recall the terrible past, but she had a way of asking what may be called

sympathising questions, which quickly drew forth Violet's confidence.

For the first time she found a sister to whom she could express her feelings unrestrainedly; and even that brief hour of companionship did her much good. Not till all trace of distant formality had been removed, not till there had been a certain degree of familiarity established between them, did Agnes allude to the real object of her visit. She had come to ask Violet as a favour—so she put it—to spend a little time with her. The Towers were so very, very lonely—she said this in a tone that was evidently sincere — she had so few visitors, practically none, and she should be so glad if Violet would come. Violet saw in an instant that it was really out of kindness to her that the invitation was given; she wished to accept it, and yet hesitated. Agnes pressed her. Then she remembered Aymer—what would he say? If she went, he would be alone—he would not see her,

and she would not see him. Thinking of him, a slight blush rose to her cheek. Perhaps Agnes guessed what was passing in her mind, for she said—

"Mr. Malet will, of course, come and see us—often. You must ask his permission, you know. I will come again to-morrow and fetch you in the brougham."

So it was practically settled, and Agnes, after a warm farewell, departed. Violet waited for Aymer, almost fearing he would upbraid her; but then the separation would only be for a little time. A little time!

When Agnes Lechester came to ask her to The Towers, she came with a full knowledge of Violet's position—of her monetary loss, and of the noble self-sacrifice she had made.

It chanced—"circumstances over which we have no control" again—that Mr. Broughton, to whom Violet had transferred her affairs, had succeeded to the business of an uncle, an elder Mr. Broughton, who was

almost the hereditary solicitor of the Lechester family. The position was one of great emolument, and gave some social precedence; hence, perhaps, part of the jealousy exhibited towards him by Mr. Merton—an older man, and not so fortunate. From him Agnes learnt the whole of the details. The frightful catastrophe—the mystery of the murder of poor Waldron—had greatly impressed her, and the sad circumstances of the interrupted bridal trebled the interest she had taken in Violet and Aymer. She had instructed Broughton to inform her of everything, and especially of how matters stood with Violet now her father was no more. As he had now the charge of Violet's affairs, it was easy for him to do this; and being a comparatively young man, and with a heart not yet quite dead to feeling, he was himself much interested in the woman who could so willingly give up the last fragment of her fortune.

Agnes Lechester was deeply impressed

by Violet's generosity and abrogation of self—she felt the warmest sympathy and desire to assist her—she really was anxious to make her acquaintance, and the result was her visit to The Place. Ostensibly the invitation was for a little time only; but Agnes knew that the house, which alone was left to Violet, could not support her, and intended to prolong the invitation indefinitely. She really was lonely, and really did look forward to a companion in whom she could trust.

Aymer was overjoyed when he heard what had happened, and insisted upon Violet accepting the invitation. Violet's isolation, and the daily increasing awkwardness of her position, troubled him greatly. He knew not what to do for her. Here was a resource—a haven of safety for a while at least. Never mind about himself—doubtless he could see her sometimes; so long as she was safe and comfortable he should be happy, much

happier even than in their present unrestricted intercourse—though this was said with a sigh.

He lingered long with her that evening, longer than he had ever done before; it was the last, perhaps, they should ever spend together in that house, which was still very dear to them, notwithstanding the tragedy it had witnessed. The time came at last when they must separate. It was the saddest walk that night that he had ever had across the Downs. They were enveloped in a thick mist—only instinct and long use kept him in the path—an impenetrable gloom hung over him. Even the fir trees were silent; there was no breeze to stir them, to produce that low sighing sound that seems to mean so much to those who will pause and listen.

The morrow was brighter; there was a little sunshine, clouded and feeble, but still there was a little. It would be difficult to explain the process by which it

came about. There are means of communication between persons without direct words. Thus it happened that almost by a species of volition, Agnes Lechester, Violet, and Aymer, before the hour to depart arrived, walked slowly and mournfully to the old, old church, across the meadows by the well-worn path, which the morning's frost had left hard and dry. Since that terrible day Violet had never been—she could not. But now, somehow, with this newly-found companion, strengthened by two loving hearts, one on either side, it seemed to her as if a holy peace might perhaps descend upon her if she could visit her father's tomb.

With her face hidden by a thick veil, the tears standing in her eyes, the poor girl walked between them. Few words passed —silence was more natural and fitting than speech. They met two or three persons, all of whom knew Violet and Aymer; but these paid the homage to sorrow which the

rudest tender, and went by silently, raising their hats. No one interrupted them; no one stared with vulgar curiosity. These three were alone—alone with the memory of the dead. And strangely enough, all three were orphans. It was Agnes Lechester who reminded them of that fact as they stood before the tomb; it was, she said in a low voice, another bond of union between them.

The inscription had not yet been put up; the slab was plain. Their visit was very short; it was more than Violet could bear. The tomb was just without the church. Agnes motioned to Aymer to leave them; he walked away a few paces. Together the two women entered the church; they were alone in the sacred edifice. With slow steps poor Violet, leaning on Agnes's arm and sobbing bitterly, walked up that very aisle, over that very figure of the ancient knight in brass, past the antique font—the very aisle where she had gone in all

her wedding splendour amid the admiration of the gathered crowd. And now she came again—came with a stranger—in silence and sorrow, to kneel on the steps that led up to the chancel to pray as best her throbbing heart would permit. Was that prayer more for the living, or the dead?

Violet had been reared a Protestant in the Articles of the Church of England, yet I question whether in that supreme moment her soul was not fuller of prayer for him who had gone before, than for herself and those who still lingered on earth. Those among us who can remember bitter hours of agony, say truly for whom have *they* prayed? Let us not penetrate further into the sanctuary of sorrow.

The carriage rolled away, and Aymer was alone. He watched it go down into the valley out of sight. He turned and ascended the Downs, not daring to look back upon the old, old house. At the summit

he could command an extended view. Far away the white road ran up over a hill, and he could see a black dot crawling slowly up it. He knew it was the carriage; he watched it reach the top and disappear over the brow—then she was gone.

For the first time since love had arisen in his heart he was separated from her. It was true that it was not total separation. They were bound together by ties which nothing could sever, and yet—the happy past was gone, to return no more. He was at liberty to see her at The Towers; Agnes Lechester had done her best to impress upon him that he could come whenever he chose, and would be always welcome. But Aymer had the vaguest ideas of what life with the upper ranks was like; he had a vague shrinking from entering this house; he felt that he should be restrained and at a loss. There could never be that free intercourse between him and Violet that had existed. He felt in his heart

that she would never more return to The Place. The house was to be closed that evening; would it ever be opened again?

He crushed back his despair as best he could, and went home to his cold, lonely room at the Wick Farm. Martin grudged him a fire even. Aymer crushed back his heart, and tried to work. It was very difficult. When the hand and the body are numbed with physical cold, when the heart is chilled with grief, it is hard indeed to call the fancy into play and to amuse others. Was it not Goldsmith who wrote the "Vicar of Wakefield" to pay the expenses of his parent's funeral?

Perhaps no greater proof of his wonderful genius could be given than is presented by that oft-repeated and simple anecdote. Only a transcendant genius could have forced itself out under such miserable circumstances. Aymer certainly had talent, perhaps even genius, but he had not yet found his opportunity—he was not quite certain

wherein his ability really lay. All his efforts were tentative. They failed one and all—failed just at the moment when what he most wanted was a little encouragement. He did not spare himself; he worked the whole day, saving only an hour put aside to walk upon the Downs for health's sake.

He had still fifteen pounds remaining of the munificent, and anonymous present he had received. This he husbanded with the utmost care; it was his capital, his all. With it he formed schemes of reaching London, and finding employment. He only waited till a work upon which he was now engaged was finished before he started. Now Violet was gone, there was no inducement to remain at World's End; far better to go out and face hard facts, and conquer them.

But as the days went by, and the work was half finished, a deadly despair seemed to seize him. Of what use was it? Every slow post that reached that almost forgotten

spot returned to him work rejected and despised. His sketches, he was told, "wanted spirit;" his literary labours "wanted finish, and bore marks of haste."

If these were useless, of what good was it to complete this book he was writing? It would only end in another disappointment. He ceased to open his letters; he flung them on one side. For a day or two he did nothing—he wandered about on the open Downs, seeking consolation from Nature, and finding none. At last, accusing himself of a lack of energy and fortitude, he set to work again. So it was not till two days after date that he read the following letter, which had been cast upon one side with the rest:—

"2, Market Cross, Barnham.

"DEAR SIR,—I am requested by Mr. Broughton to ask you to call upon him at your earliest convenience. He has some employment to offer you.

"With esteem, &c. &c."

He went. Broughton received him kindly, and explained that he wanted a clerk, not so much for technical work as for correspondence, and to give general assistance. Aymer being a novice and completely ignorant of such duties, could not of course expect much salary. However, he would have thirty-five shillings per week. This offer was made partly through Lady Lechester's influence, partly out of the interest he himself took in Aymer. But a true lawyer, he could not help doing even good as cheaply as possible. Aymer thanked him, and accepted the post.

CHAPTER X.

AYMER would in times gone by have regarded the employment he had now obtained as a great step in advance, and have rejoiced accordingly. But he had been too near the prize for it to give him even so much as hope for the future. He *wished* to be grateful for what he had got; he tried to look upon it as a wonderful thing, but it was impossible. The contrast between the actual, and what had been within his very grasp was too intense.

It was an easy place. Beyond a little correspondence to write for Mr. Broughton, and sometimes a little copying, he had practically nothing to do. His hours were short for the business—only from ten till four; he had plenty of time at his own disposal.

The fact was that his salary came, not directly, but indirectly from Lady Lechester, and he was favoured accordingly. If he had known this he would have been still more dissatisfied.

The office in which he was placed was a kind of library or retiring apartment, opening by double doors into Mr. Broughton's private room; and he was often called upon to bear witness to certain transactions of a strictly private nature, and in which the solicitor told him he relied upon his honour as a gentleman, to preserve secresy.

Broughton really meant him well, and did his best now and then to start him on in the acquisition of a knowledge of the law. Books were put into his hands, and he was told what parts of them to study, and had to prepare extracts from them occasionally. Aymer did his best, conscientiously, but he hated it—he hated it most thoroughly. It was not altogether that the reading in these books was dry and uninteresting to the last

degree. Flat, tame, spiritless, meaningless, —a mere collection of decisions, interpretations, precedents—such they appeared at first. Aymer had talent and insight sufficient to speedily observe that this forbidding aspect was not the true one.

All these precedents, rules, decisions—these ten thousand subtle distinctions—were much like the laws or rules of a game at chess. They decided in what way a pawn should be moved or a bishop replaced. The science of law seemed to him like a momentous game at chess, only the pieces were living human creatures.

These subtle distinctions and technical divisions, formalities though they appeared, had a meaning, and a deep one. Following his employer, Mr. Broughton, into the petty law courts at Barnham, he saw how the right and the wrong, the sorrow or the joy of human beings depended almost upon the quibble of a word, the incident of a slip of the pen. It was a game—a

game requiring long study, an iron memory, quick observation, and quicker decision; and he hated it—hated it because the right appeared to be of no consequence. Truth, and what he had always thought was meant by justice, were left entirely out of sight.

It was not the man who had the right upon his side who won. If that was the case, what use would there be for lawyers? Too often it was the man who had the law upon his side, and the law only. He actually heard magistrates, and even judges, expressing their regret that the law compelled them to give decisions contrary to the true justice of the cause before them.

By degrees he became aware of the extraordinary fact, that with all the cumbrous system of law phrases—a system that requires a special dictionary—there was not even a word to express what he understood as justice; not even a word to express it!

Justice meant a decision according to the

law, and not according to the right or wrong of the particular case proceeding; equity meant a decision based upon a complex, antiquated, unreasonable jumble of obsolete customs. The sense of the word "equity"—as it is used in the sublime prophecy, "With equity shall he judge the world"—was entirely lost.

In the brief time that he had sat beside Mr. Broughton in these Courts, Aymer conceived an intense loathing for the whole system. After all, what was the law, upon which so much was based, which over-rode equity, justice, truth, and even conscience? What was this great fetish to which every one bowed the knee—from the distinguished and learned judge downwards, the judge who, in point of fact, admitted and regretted that he decided against his conscience? It was principally precedent. Because a man had once been hung for a murder committed in a certain manner, men must always be hung for murder.

Because a judge had once given a verdict which, under the circumstances, was as *near the right* as he dared to go (and our judges do this), then every one who came after must be dealt with by this immovable standard.

The very passage of time itself—the changes introduced into society, custom, and modes of thought in the course of the years—was in itself a strong and all-sufficient argument against this fetish precedent.

That was not all. Aymer in his position—to a certain extent confidential—had a glimpse behind the scenes. Quick of observation and comprehension, he saw that even this game of argument, and precedent, and quibble was not conducted honestly. He had heard and read so much of the freedom, the liberty of England, the safety of the subject, the equal justice meted out to all, that he was literally confounded when the bare facts stared him in the face.

There was jobbery, corruption under the whole of it; there was class prejudice operating in the minds of those on the judgment-seat; there were a thousand-and-one small, invisible strings, which pulled this way and that behind the scenes. It was, after all, a species of Punch and Judy show, moved by wires, and learnt by rote by the exhibitor.

It sickened and wearied him. Sitting on those hard benches, he longed for liberty—longed to escape from the depressing influence of the atmosphere of chicanery in which he was plunged. The very sight of those hideous faces which are sure to congregate in the criminal justice-room, seemed to weaken the fresh young spirit within him.

Yet, as said before, Mr. Broughton used him kindly. He found Aymer lodgings cheap and fairly comfortable. Aymer had often desired to escape from his solitary room at Wick Farm; but even that cold,

lonely apartment was better than this. These four walls had no association—they were walls only—partly concealed with a few common prints. One of these, over the mantelpiece, looked down upon him as he sat by his fire in the evening. He saw it night after night, till at last that engraving seemed to almost live, and he watched to see when the labour of the prisoner should be completed. For it was the picture of the prisoner sitting in his cell upon a stone bench, painfully chiselling out upon the stone wall—just where a single beam of sunlight fell—the figure of Christ upon the Cross, with the rude tool of a common iron nail.

He grew to understand the feelings and the thought, to sympathise in the work of the prisoner in his dungeon. The solitary ray of sunshine that fell upon his life was the love of Violet. He was himself confined, imprisoned by the iron bars and the strong walls of poverty, and the tools he had at hand for his labour of love were

scanty and rude. How could he in that contracted sphere, without travel, without change of scene and conversation with other men, ever hope to find materials for works with which to please the world, and obtain for himself fame and position? He understood now the deep meaning of the words put in Ulysses' mouth—"I am a part of all that I have met." They applied with tenfold force to the artistic, and to the literary career. It was only by extended experience, by contact with the wide, wide world, that he could hope to comprehend what it wanted. Yet it sometimes happened that even the prisoner in his cell, by sheer self-concentration, and with the aid of the rude tools and material within his reach, produced a work which could not be surpassed. The poor prisoner of the picture reminded him constantly of this. He tried. He thought and thought, till at last, in the quiet and solitude of his lonely room, an idea did occur to him—not a very great or

remarkable idea either, but still one which, he felt, if properly carried out, might produce substantial results.

Evening after evening, upon leaving the office, he laboured at his new conception, illustrating his book with his own pencil, spending hour after hour upon it far into the night. So absorbed was he upon it, that he almost neglected Violet's letters—almost, he could not quite—but his notes were so short and so unlike his usual style, that she, with her knowledge of his character, saw at once what he was doing, and kept begging him not to overwork himself.

"Circumstances over which we have no control." There are other circumstances still more powerful—*i.e.*, those circumstances which we never even think of controlling, which happen so quietly and whose true significance is so little apparent at the time, that we pass them by without a thought.

It happened that Mr. Broughton was

engaged in a cause which necessitated extracts to be made from a file of old newspapers. Being overworked himself, and his staff also in full employment, he asked Aymer to do this, and to do it especially well and carefully. Aymer began the work, and at first found it dry enough, but as he got deeper into it, the strange contrast presented by this contemporary chronicle with the present day gradually forced itself upon him, and he ceased to cast aside the papers so soon as the particular extract required was made.

Presently the idea occurred to him of writing an article for the London papers, founded upon the curiosities of these old sheets of news. With this view, after he had finished the work he was set to do, he got into the habit of carrying two or three of the papers home, and re-reading and studying them, and making notes by his own fireside. The file was really interesting. It began in the year 1710. The

Barnham Chronicle was one of those extremely old papers published in county towns, which live on from year to year without an effort, because they meet with no opposition. The circle of its readers, in all probability, at that date—more than a century and a half after its establishment—was scarcely larger than in the first year of publication. It had been taken and read by whole generations. The son found it taken by his father, and when he succeeded to the farm, to the mill, or to the shop, continued the old subscription.

Looked at in the light of the present day, when intelligence is flashed from end to end of the kingdom in a few hours, the *Barnham Chronicle* was all but ridiculous. Its news was a week old or more, stale and unprofitable. It did not even advance so far as to have a London letter; but perhaps that was no great loss to its readers.

Yet the *Barnham Chronicle* was a "property" in more than one sense; it paid, as

well it might, at fourpence per copy, and with the monopoly of auctioneer's and lawyer's advertisements in that district. And it could boast of a more than patriarchal age.

Reading slowly, paragraph by paragraph, through this enormous file, his note-book at his side, Aymer came upon one advertisement, simply worded, and with no meretricious advantage given to it by large type or other printer's resource, yet which he read with a special interest. It contained the name of Waldron, of The Place, Bury Wick; and that name was sufficient to attract him. It ran thus:—

"Notice of Change of Name.—I, Arthur Sibbold, tea-dealer, of the City of London, in the county of Middlesex, do hereby give notice, that it is my intention to apply for permission to add to my present baptismal names the name of Waldron, upon the occasion of my approaching marriage with Miss Annica Waldron, of The Place, Bury

Wick, co. B.——, &c., &c. And that I shall be henceforward known, called, and designated by the name of Arthur Sibbold Waldron in all deeds, writings, &c., &c."

To us who are acquainted with the history of the city of Stirmingham, this entry has a wide significance; to Aymer it had none beyond the mere fact of the mention of Waldron. He copied it into his note-book with a mental resolve to show it to Violet, and thought no more of it. An event that happened about this time made him forget all about what appeared to him a trivial matter. This was the trial of Jenkins, the gardener, for the murder of Jason Waldron. Mr. Broughton, who was engaged for the defence, to instruct counsel, naturally made much use of Aymer's local knowledge and perfect acquaintance with the details of that terrible day, and was thereby furnished with fresh and overwhelming arguments.

Aymer worked with a will, for he knew

that Violet was much concerned and extremely anxious as to the result, and he watched the proceedings on the fateful day with intense interest. It is needless to recapitulate the details of the case, which have been already given. The result was an acquittal. The Judge summed up in favour of the prisoner, observing that it was monstrous if a man must be condemned to the last penalty of the law, because it so chanced that a tool belonging to him had been snatched up as the readiest instrument for a murderous attack. To his experience the murder did not appear at all in the light of an ordinary crime. In the first place, there was an apparent absence of motive. So far as was known, Waldron had no enemies and no quarrel with any man. Evidently it was not committed with the intention of theft, as not a single article had been missed. It appeared to him like the unaccountable impulse of an unreasoning being; in plain words, like the act of

a lunatic with homicidal tendencies. The jury unanimously acquitted the prisoner, and Aymer hastened to send the news to Violet. He could not post with it himself, as Mr. Broughton had other cases to attend to.

Poor Jenkins was free—and lost. The shock had stunned him, and he was too old and too much weakened by disease to ever recover from it. He could not face his native village, the place where his family, though humble, had for generations borne a good character. He had an almost childish dread of meeting any one from Bury Wick or World's End, and even avoided Aymer, who sought him in the crowd.

How truly was it said that "service is no inheritance!" After two generations of faithful service, these poor people were practically exiled from home and friends, and this without fault of their own. Violet would have gladly done what she could for

the aged couple. They might have, at all events, lived at The Place and taken care of the old house, but she and Aymer lost sight of them entirely.

All that was known was that a few weeks after the acquittal, a waggon came and fetched away their goods from the cottage, and Jenkins was heard of no more —for the time. He had, in fact, found work, and buried himself, as he hoped, for ever out of sight. There was a certain natural pride in him, and it had been cruelly trampled upon. Suffer what he might, he would not ask for aid—not even from Violet. And he did suffer—he and his poor shattered wife. With not exactly a bad character, but the stigma of "murder" clinging to him, he wandered about seeking work, and nearly starved.

Even in Bury Wick, where he was so well known, had he returned, he would have found a certain amount of reluctance to receive him into the old grooves. In

distant villages where the dreadful tale of blood had penetrated, and where the people had had little or no opportunity of hearing the facts, there was still a strong prejudice against him; and it must be owned that from an outsider's point of view, it *did* look suspicious that he should have been alone near the house when the deed was committed. So it was that he found it hard to get employment, especially now the winter was come, and labour less in demand.

At length, worn out and exhausted with hunger and wandering, he accepted the wages of a boy from Albert Herring, and a waggon was sent to fetch his goods.

Albert Herring had the reputation of being a hard master, and it was well deserved. Hard work, long hours, small pay, and that given grudgingly, and withheld on trivial pretences—these were the practices which gained for him the hatred of the labouring population. Yet with

singular inconsistency they were always willing to work for him. This is a phenomenon commonly to be observed—the worst of masters can always command plenty of men.

With Jenkins it was a matter of necessity. If he could not get work he must starve or go into the union—dreaded almost as much as the prison. Albert kept him several days after his application—he would see about it—he was in no hurry. He laid much stress upon the gardener's age, though the other assured him that willingness would compensate for that. Jenkins had been a gardener, not a labourer. It was doubtful if he would understand his duties if he was put on to cut a hedge.

"Oh, yes!" said the old man, eagerly; "I can use an axe or a bill-hook."

"Aye, aye," said Albert, brutally. "Thee can *use a bill-hook*, so I've heeard say."

Jenkins bowed his head, and his lip quivered.

The upshot was that he was put on at nine shillings per week—one shilling to be deducted for rent of a small cottage.

CHAPTER XI.

THIS trial of poor Jenkins took up Aymer's time, so that he had no leisure for his new book, which had to be laid aside; and when he was in hopes of returning to it, another incident again interrupted him. The work he had to do was very little after all; it was not the amount, but the character of it, that he disliked.

Yet, notwithstanding his hatred of the law, he could not help imbibing some small smattering which afterwards proved extremely serviceable. The change from World's End was also beneficial in another manner—it opened his eyes to much that he had never suspected. If anything, his inclination hitherto would have been to have

taken most people pretty much at their word. This may sound childish to the young men of the period, who—in the habit of frequenting billiard saloons, horse-races, card parties, hotels, and all places where people congregate—naturally pick up a good deal of knowledge of the world—sufficient to astonish their parents, at all events.

Aymer certainly was not a model young man. Without a doubt, if he had been placed where such amusements were easily accessible, he would have done much as others of his age did; but it so happened that living at World's End, entirely out of society, he had no such opportunities. After a month or so at Broughton's office his eyes began to open, and he saw that things are very different under the surface to what they appear outwardly. He became less ready to accept what people said, or did in the sense they wished others to see them, and commenced a habit of deducting a large per

centage from the price they put upon themselves.

He had been three times to see Violet—staying only a few hours—and was agreeably surprised with the pleasant reception he received from Lady Lechester, who took an opportunity of informing him privately that she wished Violet to continue with her. Violet was well, but dull. She was no sentimental heroine to pine away at separation from Aymer; but it was only natural that she should miss the old associations. Particularly she begged Aymer not to overwork himself at night with his private labour.

Lady Lechester seconded this, saying that she had known a gentleman who, much of the same disposition as Aymer, had lost his wits through incessant application. He was a relation of hers, and was now confined in an asylum at Stirmingham. To save speculation, it will be as well to at once mention that this person was not Odo Lechester.

Aymer's reply was that he feared he should

never complete his book, for something always seemed to happen to delay it, and now he should soon have to accompany Mr. Broughton to Stirmingham.

It was in this way. Mr. Broughton, before removing to Barnham, where he inherited the practice and most of the fortune of a deceased uncle, had lived in Stirmingham, working as the junior partner in a firm there. He was no longer a partner, but still continued on friendly relations with the firm; and having much confidence in his ability, they frequently sent for him in difficult cases.

Now this firm—Messrs. Shaw, Shaw, and Simson—had one very good client, who had been to them almost equal to an estate, bringing in a yearly income, and paying cash without dispute. This client, or rather these clients, was one of those very building societies which had leased old Sternhold Baskette's incomplete houses for a term of years.

House property is, as every one knows, fruitful in causes of litigation—repairs, defaulting tenants, disputes, and what not; and, in addition, there is the task of collecting the rents, and a vast variety of smaller pickings. All these Shaw, Shaw, and Simson had enjoyed for fully half a century, till they had come to look upon them as their legitimate right, and as certain to descend into the hands of their successors. But as time went on, they began to get anxious, and to perceive that there was a great deal of truth in the ancient maxim, "This too shall pass away," for the term of the lease, long as it was, rapidly approached expiration.

Obviously, it was their interest to delay the delivering up of the property to the heir, John Marese Baskette, as long as possible; and they felt the stake to be so great, that they did not spare their own money in the effort to oust him from his just claim.

Messrs. Shaw, Shaw, and Simson were all three old and experienced men—safe men, in every sense; but they hesitated to trust entirely to their own ingenuity in this complicated business. They had, in fact, entrusted it to Mr. Broughton, who was not only more energetic, but was full of resources which would never have occurred to such steady persons as the three partners.

So it happened that, as the fall of the year advanced, Broughton had his hands full of the building societies' business, and had engaged to proceed to Stirmingham as their legal representative, at the great family council of the claimants in the Sternhold Hall, which was to open in three or four days.

Another circumstance that brought Aymer into still closer contact with the great case, was the fact that this firm of Shaw, Shaw, and Simson had an American client, who was himself one of the claimants. His

name was another variation upon the old stem.

Anthony Baskelette was tolerably well to do. He had a great business, and had large transactions with manufacturers in Stirmingham. These necessitated an agent there, and Shaw, Shaw, and Simson had for years looked after his affairs. He was one of the Original Swampers. He really could prove his direct descent from one of old Will Baskette's cousins, and held ample documentary evidence; and being moderately wealthy, thought he would have a trial at the monster estate at Stirmingham. He instructed Shaw, Shaw, and Simson to get up his claim in a legal form, and announced his intention of accompanying the body of the claimants to England in the steamer *Lucca*, which had been so generously chartered by Marese.

All the correspondence from him to Shaw and Company w s sent on to Barnham; and in this way Aymer, who had much to do

with Broughton's correspondence, began to have some idea of the magnitude of the interests at stake. Though constitutionally averse to the law, and hating its formalities, he could not help feeling some considerable excitement about this tremendous case, and perhaps showed more genuine alacrity in executing Broughton's instructions relating to it, than he had with other matters.

At all events, Broughton told him that he should want him to act as his clerk, or notary, during his approaching visit to Stirmingham. The lawyer had begun to feel a certain amount of trust and confidence in Aymer, who never failed to fulfil his orders, though obviously against the grain, and especially as Aymer's demeanour was quiet and gentlemanly. If he did venture to throw out a suggestion, it was in the most respectful and diffident manner.

In this way it happened that Aymer became well up in the *latter* part of the history of Stirmingham, especially in that

section of the case which concerned the Baskettes, and in time it grew to be almost the leading thought in his mind. His letters to Violet were full of it. The history was so romantic—so extraordinary, and yet so true—that it took strong hold upon his imagination.

He looked forward with pleasure to his approaching visit to Stirmingham. Like all men with any pretence to brains, though he delighted in Nature and loved the country, there was a strong, almost irresistible, desire within him to mingle in the vast crowds of cities, to feel that indefinable "life" which animates the mass. A great city to such a man as Aymer was like a wonderful book—an Arabian Night's tale, an endless romance which would afford inexhaustible pleasure in the study of its characteristics.

Though it would involve at least a month's absence from Violet, he looked forward to the visit with impatience—not without a secret hope that he might in some unex-

pected manner find a chance of rising in the scale, and getting a little nearer to the object of his life.

He had a number of commissions to execute for Lady Lechester—particularly one. This was to search the old bookstalls and the curiosity shops, in out-of-the-way corners, for antique Bibles. Agnes had a weakness, if it may be so called, for collecting old editions of the Bible, and possessed a large and extremely interesting library filled with them. One or two particularly rare copies had hitherto escaped her search, and if there was such a thing to be found in Stirmingham she felt sure that Aymer would be precisely the man to find it.

He had also a commission to purchase for her a few pictures, with which to decorate the walls of a new wing she was adding to The Towers. She had a curious dislike to the old family mansion, and yet wished to live in the neighbourhood from a sense of duty. She held it as a doctrine that the

owners of large estates should pass a part of their time, at all events, at home—there were so many ways in which they could do good, not only by charity, but by encouraging local industries.

The new wing was being built to enable her to reside at home, and yet gratify the innate dislike to The Towers which she cherished. Aymer's artistic taste was so marked that she felt confident he would select her suitable pictures. There were plenty of old paintings in the galleries of The Towers which could have been spared for the new wing, but she preferred to be surrounded with fresh objects, even down to the very footstool.

The day for the assembling of the great family council came nearer and nearer, and the letters from Anthony Baskelette more frequent. The daily papers, which Aymer saw now and read with the closest attention, began to devote a space to notes upon the preparations, and some sent specials to

Stirmingham in advance, who described the city in a series of sketches, which excited Aymer's curiosity to the highest pitch.

News came at last that the claimants were assembling at Imola; then the date of the sailing of the *Lucca* came and passed. They knew that she must sail upon that day, because her owners were under contract to deliver the bullion entrusted to them on a fixed date in London, where its approaching arrival had already had an appreciable effect upon the money-market. Seven hundred thousand pounds in coin, in gold bars and Mexican dollars, is a sum which cannot be transferred from one country to another at once, without causing some fluctuations upon the Exchange. The owners of the *Lucca* were under a bond by which they forfeited a heavy sum if the vessel did not start to time. Therefore there was no doubt that the *Lucca* had sailed, though no announcement had reached London of the event, for it happened that the Atlantic

cables were out of order, and there were not then such a number of cables as at present. Still, no one doubted for an instant that she was upon the seas; and one well-known illustrated paper announced that a special artist of theirs was on board, who, the moment he landed, would present the public with sketches of the incidents of the voyage, portraits of the claimants, and other subjects of interest. It was also generally understood that the heir, in his yacht, had started from New York to accompany the steamer.

What was Aymer's surprise and regret, upon opening the paper on the second morning after, to see the following telegram, one of the cables having got into partial working order again :—

"New York, Tuesday Night.

"The *Lucca* sailed on Friday at noon, but *without* the claimants. She brings the specie announced."

Then there was an editorial note to the

effect that several other words of the telegram could not be read, on account of the unsatisfactory state of the wires. The evening papers had further particulars: —

"The *Lucca,* and the yacht of John Marese Baskette, Esq., have passed Sandy Hook. All well. A snow-storm blocked the line from Imola to New York, and the claimants could not arrive in time. They follow per *Saskatchewan.*"

Next day additional particulars came to hand. It appeared that the heir, Marese, had on the Wednesday gone to Imola, and received an ovation from the assembled claimants. He was to accompany them to New York on the Friday, and to follow the *Lucca* in his yacht. On Thursday night there came a heavy fall of snow and a strong wind, which caused immense drifts. Notwithstanding these the special train, with Marese and one hundred and fifty claimants, started from Imola with a pilot-engine in front, the station-masters along

the line having telegraphed that they would clear it in time. They did partially succeed in the attempt; but the storm came on again, the wires were blown down, and telegraphic communication for a part of the way interrupted.

In the thick snow the special crept along, with the pilot in front; but, despite of all their caution, the pilot-engine ran into a drift and stuck fast. The special came up, but there was no collision. To proceed was, however, impossible; every moment made it more so, and they began to fear lest the return to Imola should be also blocked up.

After much consultation it was decided to run back to Imola, and proceed by a more circuitous route. There was just a chance that, if this other route was clear of snow, they might get to New York in time. They put on steam and pushed as fast as possible, and the consequence was a narrow escape from a serious disaster. The

wind, since they had passed, had blown down a large pine tree, which fell across the line. The engine of the special struck this tree, but being provided with cow-guards, was not thrown off the line. Some of the machinery was, however, damaged, and the special came to a standstill. After a long delay, consequent on the interruption of telegraphic communication, a second train was sent up, and the passengers re-embarked in it, and at last got back to Imola. It was now, however, too late to reach New York in time, especially as the longer route was equally encumbered with drifts of snow. The result was that the *Lucca* was obliged to start without them.

CHAPTER XII.

THE *Saskatchewan* was to start on the next Friday. The claimants had arrived at New York on the Sunday, after much trouble and a long journey, having to make an immense detour. The council could not now hold its first meeting on New Year's Day, but was expected to assemble on the 6th January (Twelfth Day).

For two days they were without intelligence at Barnham and Stirmingham, the cables being wrong again, but on the third Aymer was sent for to the private residence of Mr. Broughton at seven in the morning. The London dailies had not yet arrived, but he had received a private telegram from Shaw, Shaw, and Simson, with the most

extraordinary news. The yacht of Mr. Marese Baskette had brought the steamship *Lucca* back to port a derelict, having found her helpless on the high seas, with every passenger and every one of the crew dead.

Presently the papers came and contained the same announcement, though they one and all expressed a strong doubt as to the accuracy of the news. By-and-by down came a second edition of the *Telegraph*, repeating the former telegram, with additional particulars. By night it was known as a fact over the length and breadth of the world, that the *Lucca* had been found lying like a log upon the waste of waters with a crew of corpses—a veritable ship of the Dead. The ghastly news was only too true. Excitement rose to the highest pitch; edition after edition of the papers sold out; men congregated in groups, discussing this new horror which had saddened civilisation. All were completely in the dark

as to how it had happened, and in the eagerness for further insight the brief telegram announcing that the claimants had started on board the *Saskatchewan* was overlooked. There were plenty, however, who pointed out to each other the fortunate escape the claimants had had. If the snow had not fallen on that particular night; if the wires had not been broken by the falling posts; if the pine tree had fallen on one side instead of crossing the line, they would in all human probability have one and all shared the fate of those on board the *Lucca*.

Only one circumstance caused any abatement of the intense alarm which this fearful occurrence created. It was this: The greater portion of the space allotted for passenger accommodation on the *Lucca* had been taken by Marese for the claimants, and as it was not certain up to the last moment whether they would come or not, the ship started with less than a third of her full complement of passengers. There was not, therefore,

such a death-roll as might have been; but, even as it was, it was extended enough.

No one could understand how it had happened; not the slightest explanation was given, and the public mind was exercised in speculating upon the cause of the disaster. The passage from America to England had long lost the character of a voyage. The height to which perfection had been carried in the great steamship lines, was such that it had become a mere ocean promenade. No one thought of danger; the perils of the deep had been so thoroughly overcome. In the midst of this security came a shattering blow, which dispelled the confidence slowly built up by such an expenditure of skill and money as had perhaps never been equalled in the history of the world. The mystery seemed impenetrable. If the vessel had disappeared like the *City of Boston;* if it had sunk, there would have been several explanations possible. But to be brought back into port

perfect, uninjured, and yet a derelict, with a dead crew—it was inexplicable.

The *Saskatchewan* arrived on the 2nd January, and with her came the claimants —all but Marese—and these immediately proceeded to Stirmingham. It was hoped that she would have brought fuller particulars as to the fate of the *Lucca ;* but having started on the very day that the *Lucca* returned to port, nothing more was known on board than the simple fact.

On the 4th, however, another steamer came into Liverpool, bringing the New York papers up to date, and the contents of these were at once published in London.

By the steamer came a letter from Anthony Baskelette. He had left the *Saskatchewan* on hearing of the *Lucca*'s return, in great anxiety about some consignment he had made by her to his agent in Stirmingham. He had met the heir, and had been invited to accompany him to England on board his yacht, which would not reach Liverpool

till the 9th. He was full of the *Lucca* catastrophe, and his long letter contained more particulars than four papers.

Aymer read it with the deepest interest. It ran :—

"You will of course attend the council on the 6th, both in the interest of the building society and of myself. I am delayed by the necessity of seeing after the consignment I had made on board the unfortunate *Lucca*, which consignment is too valuable to be left to agents. I am in the greatest anxiety, because it is uncertain yet in what light the rescue of the *Lucca* will be regarded.

"There can be no doubt that if the owner of the yacht—Mr. Marese Baskette—likes, he can put in a heavy claim for salvage. The question is—whether in his position as the ostensible heir, and as a gentleman, he will insist upon his right, or, at all events, moderate his demands?

"I have met and conversed with him, and I gather from him that personally he is averse to making any claim at all. He considers that his yacht simply performed a duty, and a duty that was imperative upon her captain. To take money from those unfortunate persons who had consigned goods, or bullion in the *Lucca* he thought would be contrary to every sentiment of honour and humanity.

"But, unfortunately, he is not altogether a free agent. It appears that at the time when the salvage of the *Lucca* was effected, there was on board the yacht a certain Mr. Theodore Marese—a cousin of Mr. Baskette's, who is only in moderate circumstances, and naturally looks upon the event as a windfall which may never occur again —as I hope and pray it never will.

"Mr. Theodore Marese, it seems, performed some personal service in rescuing the *Lucca*, and was considered to have run considerable risk to his life.

"A certain sum will have no doubt to be paid to Mr. Theodore, and I cannot blame him if he insists upon his right. He was practically the master of the yacht at the time, and it seems was on his way —with Mr. Baskette's permission—to London, to attend to some very urgent business there, which the catastrophe of the *Lucca* has delayed and greatly injured, causing him pecuniary loss.

"Then there is the captain of the yacht, and the crew. It is a fine vessel—some 300 tons or more, I should think—a screw steamer, and very fast. She carries a rather numerous crew, and all these are ravenous for plunder, and it is hard to see how these claims are to be avoided. Still further, it seems that Mr. Baskette himself is not altogether a free agent. He freely admitted to me that he was not without his debts—as is probable enough to a man of fashion, with a certain position to maintain.

"These creditors may take advantage of

the *Lucca* business to push him, and say that he must take the salvage in order to meet their demands. Of this he is greatly afraid.

"Baskette is a most pleasant man, easy to converse with, very open and straightforward—quite a different person to what I should have expected. He has been particularly agreeable to me, promising his best efforts to curtail my loss, and has given me a cabin in his now famous yacht, the *Gloire de Dijon*.

"I cannot drive the subject of the salvage from my mind. The saloons, bars, hotels—everywhere people talk of nothing else. It has quite eclipsed the tragedy, as well it might, from the magnitude of the sums involved.

"First of all, there is the vessel herself—found upon the high seas, a derelict, without a hand at the wheel or at the engines. She is a splendid steamer, fully 3000 tons, and estimated at half a million of dollars, or, say, 100,000*l*. The cargo she

carried was immensely valuable—the bullion you know about: it was 718,000*l.* in exact figures—but the cargo must be worth at least another 75,000*l.*

"Then there is a very large amount of personal property, for half the claimants who were to go by her had forwarded their luggage previously; and there are the effects of the poor creatures who died. But these last, Mr. Baskette declares, shall under no circumstances be touched. Happen what may, they are to be returned to the owners or their heirs undiminished.

"Putting it all at the lowest estimate, the value of the vessel, the bullion, and cargo cannot be less than 893,000*l.*; and the salvage will equal a gigantic fortune.

"So far I have dealt only with the salvage question. I will now proceed to give you a more detailed account than you will be able to get from the papers, of the terrible fate which overtook the *Lucca*. These I have learnt from Mr. Baskette and from

Mr. Theodore Marese, who was on the yacht.

"The reporters are, of course, incessant in their inquiries, but there is much that has escaped them, as a certain amount of reticence must of necessity be observed. These gentlemen have, however, made no reserve to me—I must beg of you not to publish this letter, or any part of it, lest there should appear to be a breach of confidence.

"It appears that the *Lucca* started at noon on the Friday, as per bond, with a full complement of crew, but a short list of passengers. About two hours after she had left, the *Gloire de Dijon* put out to sea. Mr. Baskette was at that time still at Imola, unable to get to New York. He and his cousin, Mr. T. Marese, were to have gone together in the yacht to London, where Mr. Theodore's business was very pressing.

"When Mr. Baskette found himself unable to reach New York, he telegraphed to Mr.

Theodore telling him to take the yacht and go on to London as had been previously arranged, thereby showing the same character of consideration for others which he has since exhibited to me.

"Mr. Theodore put to sea in the *Gloire de Dijon*, and says that next morning they overtook the *Lucca*, or nearly so, the yacht being extremely swift. It occurred to him that, after all, as the Atlantic is still the Atlantic, notwithstanding steam, and there are such things as breaking machinery, it would be well to keep in company with a powerful vessel like the *Lucca* as far as the coast of Ireland.

"They did so, and even once spoke the steamship, which replied, 'All well.' All that day the two ships were not half a mile apart, and the night being moonlit, the *Gloire de Dijon* followed close in the other's wake till about four in the morning, when, as often happens at sea, a thick fog came on. Afraid of collision, the captain of the

yacht now slackened speed to about six knots, and kept a course a little to the starboard of the steamer ahead.

" The fog continued very thick till past noon, and then suddenly lifted, and they saw seven or eight sail in sight, one of which was the *Lucca* on their port bow, and about four miles off. She was running, as usual, at a good pace, and the sea being quiet, was making all thirteen knots. The *Gloire de Dijon* increased speed, and drew up to within a mile and a half by three in the afternoon. The *Lucca* then bore due east, and they were in her wake. The wind was west, with a little southerly, and just ahead of the *Lucca* was a large square-rigged ship, with all sail set, but making very little way on account of the trifling breeze.

" An extraordinary thing now happened. The *Lucca* was observed by the captain of the yacht to be making straight for the sailing ship ahead, and had now got so

close that a collision appeared inevitable. He called to Mr. Theodore, who came up from below. The *Lucca* ran dead at the sailing ship, though she was making thirteen knots to the other's four, and the slightest turn of her wheel would have carried her free. On account of the direction of the wind, the ship was sailing almost right before it, and the steamer appeared to be aiming at her stern.

"On the yacht they could see the crew of the sailing ship making frantic signs over the quarter to the steamer, but not the slightest notice was taken. The captain of the sailing ship had relied upon the steamer giving way, as is usual, and had allowed her to come so close that, it seems, he lost his head. Seeing this, the mate sang out to put the helm a-starboard, and run straight before the wind. This was done, and only just in time, for the steamer actually grazed her quarter, and carried away their boom. Knowing that the captain

of the *Lucca* was an old sailor, and a steady, experienced man, they were astonished at this behaviour, especially as, without staying to inquire what damage had been done, she kept on her course at still greater speed.

"The captain of the yacht now put on speed, being desirous of speaking the steamer; but after an hour or two it was evident that the *Lucca* was drawing ahead, and had increased her lead by at least a mile. They could not understand this, as the yacht was notoriously faster, and it became evident that the engineer of the *Lucca* must have got his safety-valve screwed down.

"Night, as every one knows, falls rapidly at this time of the year, and the darkness was increased by the fog, which now came on again. During the evening all their conversation was upon the *Lucca*. Surely she would not keep up her speed in such a fog as this? The yacht had slackened,

and was doing, as before, about six knots.

"The night wore on, till about two o'clock, when the wind freshened, and blew half a gale. At four the fog cleared, and the watch reported that the *Lucca* was on their starboard quarter, a mile astern, with her engines stopped. Mr. Theodore was called, and came on deck. There lay the steamer in the trough of the sea, rolling, heaving—so much so that they wondered her sticks did not go. No smoke issued from her funnel, and the steam-pipe gave no sign. The usual flag was flying, but no signal was shown in answer to the *Gloire de Dijon's* inquiry. There was no sail on her.

"It was at once evident that something was wrong, and Mr. Theodore ordered the yacht to be put about. They tried the signals, but, as I said, no notice was taken. On approaching the *Lucca,* which had to be done with some caution, as she slewed about in a helpless manner, and was drift-

ing before the sea, an extraordinary spectacle presented itself. As she rolled, her deck came partly into view, and they saw, with what feelings may be imagined, several men lying on the deck, and thrown now this way, now that, as the rollers went under her, evidently either dead or unconscious.

"Filled with alarm and excitement, they attempted to board the vessel, but found it impossible. The waves made all but a clean breach over her. She staggered like a drunken man, and swung now this way, now that. Some of the standing rigging had given way, and they could hear the masts creak. They were afraid to get under her lee in case they should fall.

"At length the captain of the yacht thought of a plan. He got a hawser ready with a loop, and watching his opportunity, ran the yacht close to her bow, and with his own hand, at great risk, hurled the rope, and by good luck the loop caught in the

fluke of one of her anchors. They paid the hawser out over the yacht's stern, and gradually got her in tow. It strained fearfully; but as soon as they had got the *Lucca* before the wind, they had her right enough, though there was even then some danger of being pooped. The sea was high, but not so high that the jolly-boat could live, and they manned her and boarded the *Lucca*.

"The sailors were eager enough to get on board, but so soon as they were on deck the superstition of the sea seemed to seize them, and not one would venture from the gangway; for towards the stern there lay the bodies that they had seen, still and motionless, and evidently dead.

"A terrible mystery hung over the ship—terrible, indeed!

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT one of the seamen could be got to go below, or to approach the corpses on the deck; and even the mate, who did touch these last, had a reluctance to descend. It was, however, necessary to get another hawser attached to the *Lucca*, and this occupied some little time; and by then the men became more accustomed to the ship, and at last, led by the mate, they went down.

"At the foot of the staircase a terrible sight met their gaze. A heap of people—seamen, passengers, all classes—lay huddled up together—dead. They were piled one over the other in ghastly profusion, having been probably flung about by the rolling of the ship when she got broadside on. So

great was the heap that they could not advance without either stepping upon the bodies, or removing them; and in this emergency they signalled to the yacht, which sent another boat, and in it came Mr. Theodore.

"He at once gave orders to make a passage and to explore the steamer thoroughly, which was done, and done speedily, for the sailors, having now conquered their superstitious fears, worked with a will. From that heap thirty-five bodies were carried up on deck, and laid upon one side in an awful row. They exhibited no traces of violence whatever. Their faces were quite calm, though one or two had the eyeballs staring from the head, as if they had struggled to escape suffocation.

"A search through the steamer revealed a cargo of the dead. Passengers lay at the doors of their berths, some half-dressed; and five or six were discovered in their berths, having evidently died while asleep. The

engineer lay on the floor of the engine-room with three assistants—stiff, and with features grimly distorted. They had apparently suffered more than the rest.

"The crew were found in various places. The captain lay near the engine-room, as if he had been on his way to consult with the engineer when death overtook him. Bodies were found all over the ship, and exclamations constantly arose as the men discovered fresh corpses. The air between decks was close and confined, and there was a fetid odour which they supposed to arise from the bodies, and which forced them sometimes to run on deck to breathe. This odour caused many of the sailors to vomit, and one or two were really ill for a time.

"It appeared that the whole ship's crew and all the passengers had perished; but one of the sailors searching about found a man in the wheelhouse on deck, who on being lifted up showed some slight trace of life. The sailors crowded round, and the excite-

ment was intense. Mr. Theodore, who is a physician by profession, lent the aid of his skill, and after awhile the man began to come round, though unable to speak.

"The captain of the yacht had now come on board, and a consultation was held, at which it was decided to run back to New York. But as the wind was strong and the sea high, and the hawsers strained a good deal, it was arranged to put a part of the crew of the yacht on board the *Lucca*, to get up steam in her boilers, and shape a course for the States. To this the crew of the yacht strongly objected—they came aft in a body and respectfully begged not to be asked to stay on board the *Lucca*. They dreaded a similar fate to that which befel the crew and passengers of that unfortunate steamer.

"The end of it was that Mr. Theodore ordered the hawsers to be kept attached, and the yacht was to partly tow the steamer and she was to partly steam ahead herself—

the steam was to be got up, and the engines driven at half speed. This would ease the hawsers and the yacht, and at the same time the crew on board the *Lucca* would be in communication with the yacht, and able to convey their wishes at once.

"All agreed to this. Steam was easily got up, and the *Lucca's* boilers and her engines were soon working, for the machinery was found to be in perfect order. By the time that this arrangement was perfected, and the ships were got well under weigh, the short day was nearly over, and with the night came anew the superstitions of the sailors. They murmured, and demurred to working a ship with a whole cargo of dead bodies. They would not move even across the deck alone, and as to going below it required them at once to face the mystery.

"After an hour or so a clamour arose to pitch the dead overboard. What on earth was the use of keeping them? An abomi-

nable stench came up from between decks, and many of them could barely stand it. Mr. Theodore and the captain begged them to be calm, but it was in vain. They rose *en masse*, and in a short space of time every one of these dead bodies had been heaved overboard.

"The gale had moderated, and the splash of each corpse as it fell into the water could be distinctly heard on board the yacht ahead. Such conduct cannot be too much deplored, and there was a talk of prosecuting the men for mutiny; but, on the other hand, there appears to be some excuse in the extraordinary and unprecedented horrors of the situation.

"Mr. Theodore remained on board the *Lucca*, doing all that science and patience could do for the sole survivor, who proved to be the third officer. Towards sunrise he rallied considerably, but Mr. Theodore never had any hopes, and advised the captain to take a note of his depositions, which was done.

"His name, he said, was William Burrows, of Maine. He could only speak a few sentences at a time, and that very faintly, but the substance of it was that all went well with the *Lucca* up till early that morning, when first the fog came on. Very soon after the mist settled down, and speed was reduced, there was a commotion below, and a report spread through the ship that three men were dying. In ten minutes half a dozen more were taken in this manner. They complained merely of inability to breathe, and of a deadly weakness, and prayed to be taken on deck. This was done; but then ten or twelve more were affected, and those who went below to assist them up on deck fell victims at once to the same strange disorder. Every one throughout the ship complained of a faint, sickly odour, and no sooner was this inhaled than a deadly lethargy seized upon them, and increased till they fell down and died. He happened to be on deck in the wheelhouse

at the time, and saw half a dozen sailors and three of the passengers brought up, but remembered no more, for the sickly smell invaded the deck. He heard a singing in his ears, and the blood seemed to press heavily, as if driven upwards against the roof of his skull. He remembered no more for some hours. Then he, as it were, awoke, and got up on his legs, but again felt the same lethargy, and fell. When the disorder first attacked the ship's company, the captain talked of stopping the steamer and signalling for assistance; but it appeared to be useless, for the fog was so thick that any flag, or rocket, or light would have been unnoticed at half a cable's distance. Preparations were made to fire a gun, and the steam blast was ordered, but the engineer was dead, and no one would go below. The captain then descended to go to the engine-room, and was seen no more. Meantime the steamer continued her way. When he got on his legs in the wheelhouse, it was

just after the bow of the *Lucca* had carried away the boom of an unknown sailing ship, and he could feel that she was then going at a tremendous speed. The fog had cleared, and if he had had strength enough he could have made signals, but the deadly sleep came over him again, and he was unconscious till picked up by the crew of the *Gloire de Dijon.*

"This was all he could tell, and it threw no light upon the cause of the disaster. After he had signed this in a shaky hand—I have seen the original document—he sank rapidly, and, despite of every remedy and stimulant, died before noon. His body was the only one brought into port, and it was interred yesterday in the presence of a vast assembly. A *post-mortem* examination failed to detect the slightest trace of poison or indication of disease; and all those who assisted in removing the dead bodies on board the *Lucca,* declare that they presented no known symptoms of any epidemic

—for the prevailing belief in New York at first was that some epidemic had broken out—a kind of plague, which destroyed its victims almost as soon as attacked. But for this there seems no foundation whatever. None of the sailors of the yacht caught the epidemic. One or two were unwell for a day or so, but are now well and hearty.

"I think Mr. Theodore's suggestion the best that has been made—and it gradually gains ground with educated men, though the mass cling to the fanciful notion of foul play in some unheard-of way—Mr. Theodore thinks that it was caused by the generation of coal-damp, or some similar and fatal gas, in the coal-bunkers of the *Lucca;* and everything seems to favour this supposition. It is well known that in cold weather—especially in cold weather accompanied by fog — coal-damp in mines is especially active and fatal. Most of the great explosions which have destroyed hun-

dreds at once have occurred in such a state of the atmosphere.

"Now the fog which came on that fatal morning was peculiarly thick and heavy, and it so happens that the coal in the *Lucca's* bunkers came from a colliery where, only a fortnight ago, there was an explosion. The vapour, or gas, or whatever it was that was thus generated, was not the true coal-damp, or it would have been ignited by the furnaces of the boilers, or at the cook's fires; but in all probability it was something very near akin to it. All the symptoms described by poor Burrows, are those of blood-poisoning combined with suffocation, and such would be the effects of a gas or vapour arising from coal. Fatal effects arising from damp coal in close bunkers are on record; but this is the worst ever heard of.

"It would seem that after the engineer and the crew fell into their fatal slumbers, the steam in the boilers must have reached

almost a bursting pressure—the boilers being untended—and the engineer, in falling, had opened the valve to the full, which accounts for the extraordinary speed of the *Lucca* when pursued by the yacht. Being a very long vessel and sharp in the bows, and going at a very high speed, she would naturally keep nearly a direct course, as there was little wind or sea to interfere with her rudder. So soon as the fires burned out the engines stopped, and the sea rising, she became entirely at the mercy of the waves.

"When Burrows fell a victim he saw nine or ten men on deck lying prone in a fatal sleep—when the *Gloire de Dijon* sent a boat's crew on board there were but three bodies on deck; the rest had rolled, or been washed, overboard.

"These are the principal particulars of this unprecedented catastrophe. This is a long letter, but I am sure that you will be eager for news upon the subject, and, to tell the

truth, I cannot get it out of my mind, and it relieves me to write it down.

"What a narrow escape we have all had. And especially me, for I came on to New York from Imola before the rest started, and got clear through without any snow. When it was found that they could not reach New York in time, I was in doubt whether to go by the *Lucca*, or remain and accompany the main body in the *Saskatchewan*. Accident decided. I met an old friend whom I had not seen for years, and resolved to take advantage of the delay, and spend a day or two with him. So I escaped.

"But had it not been for the snow-storm, which caused so much cursing at the time, we should one and all have perished miserably. The impression made upon us was so deep that just before the *Saskatchewan* started the whole body of the claimants attended a special service at a church here, when thanksgivings were offered for the

escape they had had, and prayers offered up for future safety.

"I look forward with much pleasure to my voyage in the *Gloire de Dijon* yacht, at Mr. Baskette's invitation. A finer, more gentlemanly man does not exist; and I am greatly impressed with the learning of Mr. Theodore."

Aymer was much struck with the contents of this letter of Anthony Baskelette's. The whole tragedy seemed to pass before his mind; his vivid imagination called up a picture of the *Lucca*, steaming as fast as bursting pressure could drive her with a crew of corpses across the winter sea. He made an extract from it, and sent it to Violet. Next day they were *en route* for Stirmingham.

At the same moment the designer of this horrible event was steaming across the Atlantic in his splendid yacht, gulling weak-minded, simple Baskelette with highest

notions of honour, and what not. When Marese found that the snow had blocked the line and prevented access to New York, his rage and disappointment knew no bounds; but he was sufficiently master of himself to think and decide upon the course to be pursued.

Although that part of the diabolical scheme which aimed at the wholesale destruction of the claimants had failed, all the other sections of it were in train to succeed. The bullion was shipped, the cargo a rich one, the steamer herself valuable—no better prize could ever fall to him. Therefore he telegraphed to Theodore in cypher to proceed as had been arranged.

The infernal machine, concealed in the simple aspect of an ordinary strong deal-box, was sent on board the *Lucca*, and everything happened just as Theodore had foreseen. If the conspirators were somewhat disturbed in their calculations by the snow-storm, on the other hand their designs

were assisted by the heavy fog which had occurred at sea. Undoubtedly this fog rendered the poisonous gas escaping from the case still more effective, as it would prevent it dispersing so rapidly, and at the same time it hid any signals the *Lucca* might have made.

Nothing more fortunate for the conspirators than this fog could have happened, for its service did not end here—it furnished a plausible explanation of what would have otherwise been inexplicable.

Theodore easily contrived the removal of the fatal case, now empty, on board the *Gloire de Dijon* after the *Lucca* had returned to port. The case had been consigned to Liverpool, which was the port the *Lucca* was bound for, and the excuse for sending it by the *Lucca* was all cut and dried—*i.e.*, that the *Gloire de Dijon* was for London.

Nothing was more natural than that, after this narrow escape, it should be wished to transfer the case to the *Gloire de Dijon*.

This was done; and while at sea Theodore quietly removed his machine and pitched it into the water at night, and it sank in the abyss, being lined with iron inside.

The question of salvage bid fair to occupy the Courts in New York for some considerable time, and to be a boon to the lawyers; but the two conspirators were far too keen to let their prize slip from them in that way. They managed to have the matter referred to arbitration, and the final result was that 400,000*l.* was awarded. This amount they at once transferred to London, and with it plunged at once into fresh schemes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE great city whose ownership was at stake, knew that the eagles were gathered to the living carcase, and yet did not feel their presence. What are one hundred and fifty people in a population of half a million? They are lost, unless they march in order and attract attention by blocking up the streets. Disband a regiment of the Line in St. Paul's Churchyard at London, and in ten minutes it would disappear, and no one would notice any unusual prevalence of red coats on the pavements.

The newspaper people were woefully disappointed, for the Press were not admitted. They revenged themselves with caricature portraits of the claimants, and grotesque

sketches of their manners and conduct. Although the Press were excluded, there were several present who could write short-hand, and amongst these was a clerk from the office of Shaw, Shaw, and Simson, whose notes I have had the opportunity of consulting.

The Sternhold Hall, in which the council was held, was built, as has been stated, upon a spot once the very centre of the Swamp, now surrounded with noble streets of mansions and club-houses, theatres, picture-galleries—the social centre of Stirmingham. The front—you can buy a photograph of it for a shilling—is of the Ionic order of architecture—that is, the modern mock Ionic—*i.e.*, the basement is supported by columns of that order, and above these the *façade* consists of windows in the Gothic style, which are, after all, dumb windows only. The guide-books call it magnificent; it is really simply incongruous.

The whole of the first two days was spent

by the one hundred and fifty claimants in wrangling as to who should take the chair, how the business should be conducted, who should be admitted and who should not. All the minor differences suppressed while on the voyage broke out afresh, the moment the eagles had scented the carcase. Two days' glimpse at the wealth of Stirmingham, was sufficient to upset all the artificial calm and friendship, which had been introduced by the generous offers of Marese Baskette. One gentleman proposed that a certain section of claimants should be wholly excluded from the hall. This caused a hubbub, and if the incident had happened in the States revolvers might have been used. The Original Swampers declared that they would not sit under a chairman drawn from any other body but themselves. The outer circle of Baskettes considered that the conceit of the Swampers was something unbearable, and declined to support them in any way. The Illegitimate Swampers alone

supported the Originals, in the hope of getting up by clinging to their coat-tails. The Primitive Sibbolds were quite as determined to sit under no president but their own, and the ranks of the other Sibbolds were split up into twenty parties. The clamour of tongues, the excitement, the hubbub was astounding.

Aymer, as clerk to Mr. Broughton, had a first-rate view of the whole, for Shaw, Shaw, and Simson had provided for the comfort of their representative by purchasing for the time the right to use the stage entrance of the room. Their offices were for the nonce established in the green-room. Their clients mounted upon the platform or stage, and passed behind the curtain to private consultation. This astute management upset the other seven companies, whose representatives had to locate themselves as best they might in the midst of a stormy sea of contending people. From the rear of the stage, just where the stage-manager was

accustomed to look out upon the audience and watch the effect upon them of the play, Aymer had a good view of the crowd below, and beheld men in every shade of cloth, with rolls of paper, yellow deeds, or old books and quill pens in their hands, gesticulating and chattering like the starlings at World's End.

For two whole days the storm continued, till at last Mr. Broughton suggested that the debate should be conducted in sections; each party to have its own president, secretary, committee, and reporter of progress; each to sit apart from the others by means of screens, and that there should be a central committee-room, to receive the reports and tabulate them in order. This scheme was adopted, and something like order began to prevail. Anthony Baskelette, Esq., who had now arrived per the *Gloire de Dijon*, was pretty unanimously voted to the presidentship of the central committee, or section, the members of which were com-

posed of representatives from every party. Screens were provided at no little expense, and the great hall was portioned out into thirty or forty pens, not unlike the high pews used of old in village churches.

Aymer was intensely interested and amused, as he stood at his peep-hole on the stage, from which he could see into every one of these pens, or pews, and watch the eagerness of the disputes going on between the actors in each.

The first great object the sections had in view was to reduce their claims to something like shape and order; for this purpose each section was numbered from 1 to 37, and was to deliver to the central section, No. 38, a report or summary of the general principles and facts upon which the members of the section based their claim. This summary of claim, as it was called, was to be short, succinct, and clear; and to be supported by minute extracts of evidence, by the vouchers of the separate

individuals, so to say, showing that the summary was correct.

These extracts of evidence attached to the summary were really not extracts, but full copies, and had to contain the dates, names, method of identification, and references to church registers, tombstones, family Bibles, and so forth.

Aymer was astounded at the magnitude of these volumes of evidence—for such, in fact, they were. He had an opportunity of just glancing at them, as they were laid upon the table of the central section one after another. The summaries were reasonable and tolerably well expressed. The minutes of evidence were something overwhelming. A section would send up in the course of a day—first, its summary and a pile of folios—seventy or eighty large lawyer's folios of evidence to be attached to it. On the morrow it would beg for permission to add to its evidence, and towards the afternoon up would come

another huge bundle of closely-written manuscript.

This would go on for several days, till the central committee at last issued an order to receive no more evidence from section No. ——.

Then section No. —— would hold an indignation meeting and protest, till the central committee was obliged to receive additional bundles of so-called evidence. Half of this evidence was nothing better than personal recollection.

The method pursued in the sections was delightfully simple and gratifying to every member's vanity. He was supplied with pen and ink, and told to put down all he could recollect about his family. The result was that in each section there were five or six people—and in some more—all busily at work, writing autobiographies; and as everybody considered himself of quite as much consequence as his neighbour, the bulk of these autobiographies can easily be imagined.

If any one had taken the trouble to wade through these personal histories, he would have been highly gratified with the fertility of the United States in breeding truly benevolent, upright, and distinguished men!

Out of all that one hundred and fifty there was not one who did not merit the gratitude of his township at least, and some were fully worthy of the President's chair at the White House. Their labours for the good of others were most carefully recorded—the subscriptions they had made to local charities far away on the other side of the Atlantic, to schoolhouses, and chapels, town-halls, and what not.

"There," ran many a proud record, —"you will see my initials upon the corner-stone—'J. I. B.,' for 'Jonathan Ithuriel Baskette,' and the date (186–), which is in itself good evidence towards my case."

All this mass of rubbish had to be sifted

by the central committee, to be docketed, indexed, arranged, and a general analysis made of it.

They worked for a while without a murmur, and suddenly collapsed. It was impossible to meet the flood of writing. Fancy one hundred and fifty people writing their autobiographies all at once, and each determined to do himself justice! Such a spectacle was never witnessed since the world began, and was worthy of the nineteenth century. The central committee flung up their hands in despair. A resource was presently found in the printing-press.

When once the idea was started, the cry spread to all corners of the hall, and rose in a volume of sound to be echoed from the roof. The Press! The Spirit evoked by Faust which he could not control, nor any who have followed him.

It was unanimously decided that everything should be printed—sectional sum-

maries, minutes of evidence, central committees analysis, solicitors arguments, references and all. There was rejoicing in the printing offices at Stirmingham that day. Now the *Stirmingham Daily Post* reaped the reward of its long attack upon the family of the heir, upon Sternhold Baskette, and Marese, his son. The contract was offered to the *Daily Post*, the *Daily Post* accepted it, and set to work, but soon found it necessary to obtain the aid of other local printers.

Now a new source of delay and worry arose. The moment everybody knew they were going into print—why is it print sounds so much better than manuscript?—each and all wanted to revise and add to their histories. First, all the sections had to receive back their summaries and minutes of evidence, to be re-written, corrected, revised, and above all extended. The scribbling of pens recommenced with redoubled vigour, and now the printer's devils appeared upon the scene. The cost of printing the

enormous mass of verbiage must have been something immense, but it was cheerfully submitted to—because each man looked forward to the pleasure of seeing himself in print.

Acres upon acres of proofs went in and out of the Sternhold Hall, and meantime Aymer grew impatient and weary of it. His time was much more occupied than at Barnham. He had to conduct all Broughton's correspondence, and when that was finished lend a hand in arranging the minutes of evidence for the committee, who had applied for assistance to the solicitors. He had only reckoned on a month at Stirmingham at the outside. Already a fortnight had elapsed, and there seemed no sign of the end.

His letters to Violet became tinged with a species of dull despair. All this scribbling was to him the very acme of misery, the very winter of discontent—meaningless, insufferable. There was no progress in it for

him: he could not find a minute's spare time now to proceed with his private work. Not a step was gained nearer Violet.

When at last the scribbling was over; when the proofs had been read and re-read and corrected till the compositors went mad; then the speechifying had to begin. This to Aymer was even more wearisome than the other. For Mr. Broughton having discovered his literary talent, employed him to listen to the debate and write a daily *précis* of its progress, which it would be less trouble to him to read than the copious and interminable notes of the shorthand writer.

This order compelled Aymer to pay close attention to every speech from first to last; and as they one and all followed the American plan of writing out their speeches and reading them, most were of inordinate length. To suit the speakers a new arrangement of the hall had to be made. The screens were now removed, and the sections placed in a kind of semi-circle, with the

central section in front. Those who desired to speak gave in their names, and were called upon by the president in regular rotation.

The first subject discussed was the method to be pursued. Some recommended that the whole body of claimants should combine and present their claims *en masse*. Others thought that this plan might sacrifice those who had good claims to those who had bad ones. Many were for forming a committee, chosen from the various sections, to remain in England and instruct the solicitors; others were for forming at once a committee of solicitors.

After four or five days of fierce discussion the subject was still unsettled, and a new one occupied its place. This was—how should the plunder be divided? Such a topic seemed to outsiders very much like reckoning the chickens before they were hatched. But not so to these enthusiastic gentlemen. They were certain of wresting the

property from the hands of the "Britishiers," who had so long kept them out of their rights—the Stars and Stripes would yet float over the city of Stirmingham, and the President of the United States should be invited to a grand dinner in that very hall!

The division of the property caused more dissension than everything else taken together. One section—that of the Original Swampers—declared that it *would* have, nothing should prevent its having, the whole of the streets, &c., built on the site of the Swamp. The Sibbolds cared not a rap for the Swamp; they *would* have all the property which had grown upon the site of old Sibbold's farm at Wolf's Glow. The Illegitimates claimed pieces here and there, corresponding to the islands of the Swamp. Some one proposed that the meeting should be provided with maps of Stirmingham, and the idea was unanimously adopted.

Then came the day of the surveyors. One vast map was ordered—it had to be

made in sections—and was estimated to cover, when extended, a mile in length by three hundred yards in breadth; and then it did not satisfy some of the claimants. Then followed a terrible wrangle over the maps. Everybody wanted to mark his possession upon it with red ink, and these red ink lines invariably interfered with one another. One gentleman proposed, with true American ingenuity, to have the map traced in squares—like the outlying territories and backwoods of America — and to assign to each section a square! But this was too equal a mode to satisfy the more grasping.

Finally, it was resolved that all the minutes of evidence should be gone through by the central committee, and that they should sketch out those portions of the city to which each section was entitled. This took some time. At the end of that time the great Sternhold Hall presented an extraordinary spectacle. The walls of the

hall, from the ceiling to the floor, and all round, and the very ceiling itself, were papered with these sections of the map, each strongly marked with lines in red ink. Near the stage there was a vast library of books, reaching half-way to the ceiling; this was composed of the summaries, minutes of evidence, &c.

All round the room wandered the claimants in knots of two or three, examining their claims as marked upon the sections of the map. Many had opera-glasses to distinguish the claims which were "skyed;" some affected to lie down on their backs and examine the ceiling with telescopes; scores had their volume of evidence in their hands, and were trying to discover upon what principle the central committee had apportioned out the city.

Of course there was a general outcry of dissatisfaction—one section had too much, another too little, and some sections, it was contended, had no right to any. The meet-

ing then resolved that each section should visit the spaces marked out for its claim, and should report to the central committee upon its value. Away went the sections, and there might have been seen five or six gentlemen in one street, and ten or twelve round the corner, with maps and pencils, talking eagerly, and curiously scanning the shops and houses—poking their noses into back courts and alleys—measuring the frontage of club-houses and theatres. The result was an uproar, for each section declared that the other had had a more valuable portion of the city given to it; and one utterly rejected its section, for it had got the Wolf's Glow district—the lowest den in Stirmingham!

After a long discussion, it was at last arranged that each section should retain, *pro tem.*, its claim as marked out, and that *when the property was realised*, any excess of one section over the other should be equally divided. These people actually contem-

plated the possibility of putting the city up to auction! To such lengths will the desire of wealth drive the astutest of men, blinding their eyes to their own absurdity.

After these preliminary points were settled, the meeting at last resolved itself into a committee of the whole house, and proceeded to business. The first business was to verify the evidence. This necessitated visits to the churches, and public record office to make extracts, &c., and two days were set apart for that purpose. It was a rich harvest for the parish clerks of Stirmingham, and especially for the fortunate clerk at Wolf's Glow. After this the meeting, beginning to be alarmed at the enormous expense it had incurred, resolved on action, and with that object it decided to hold a secret session, and to exclude all persons not strictly claimants.

This relieved Aymer from his wearisome task of chronicling the proceedings; but he could not leave or get a day to visit Violet.

As he left the hall he stopped a moment to look at the stock-in-trade of an itinerant bookseller, who had established his truck in front of the building since the family congress began. His stock was principally genealogical, antiquarian, and topographical—mostly old rubbish, that no one would imagine to be worth a sixpence, and yet which, among a certain class, commands a good sale.

The title of a more modern-looking volume caught Aymer's eye. It was "A Fortune for a Shilling," and consisted of a list of unclaimed estates, next of kin, persons advertised for, &c. He weighed it in his hand—it tempted him; yet he despised himself for his weakness. But Violet? He should serve her best by saving his shilling. He put it down, and went his way.

CHAPTER XV.

THEIR mouths watered for the great city, yet it seemed no nearer to them than when three thousand miles away on the other side of the Atlantic. They talked loudly of their rights, but there was the little difficulty of possession, which is sometimes a trifle more than nine points of the law. I have conversed with unreasonable members of a certain Church, which claims to be universal, who considered that half England—half the vast domains owned by lords and ladies, by the two hundred and fifty proprietors of Great Britain—was really the property of the Church, if she had her rights.

There are those who consider that Algeria ought to belong to the Arabs, that Africa

belongs to the blacks, and India to the Hindoos. But there comes this awkward item of possession. You have to buy the man in possession out, or else pitch him out; and the difficulty in this case was that there were so many in possession. Eight companies and a Corporation are not easily ejected.

The fact was, the grand family council was a farce, and fell through. Even as a demonstration it completely failed. The members of it might just as well have stayed at home, and sent a monster petition to the House of Lords, several hundred yards long (as per the usual custom now-a-days), and their progress would have been about as great.

The *Stirmingham Daily News*, which had published the life of Sternhold Baskette, and defended his legitimate line, poured bitter satire upon it, and held the whole business up to ridicule—as well it might. The *News* was now Conservative. The

intense self-conceit of the Yankees—to imagine that they were going to quietly take possession of a great English city, and hoist the Stars and Stripes on St. George's Cathedral at Stirmingham !

The American gentlemen fumed and fussed, and uttered threats of making the Stirmingham claim a feature in the next Presidential election—it should " leave the low sphere of personal contention, and enter the arena of political discussion;" so they said. It should be a new *Alabama* case; and if they could not have Stirmingham, they would have—the Dollars !

Meantime the dollars disappeared rather rapidly, and, after a month or six weeks of these endless wranglings in the Sternhold Hall, there began to be symptoms of an early break-up. First, three or four, then ten, then a dozen, crept off, and quietly sailed for New York, lighter in pocket, and looking rather foolish. The body, however, of the claimants could not break up in that

ignominious manner. It was necessary for them to do something to mark the fact that they had been there, at all events.

The final result was that they appointed a committee of solicitors—one for each section that chose to be represented. Twenty-two sections did choose, and twenty-two solicitors formed the English committee who were to promote the claims of one hundred and fifty able-bodied Baskettes and Sibboldians, who represented about three times that number of women and children. Then they held a banquet in the Sternhold Hall, and invited the Mayor of Stirmingham, who, however, was very busy that evening, and "deeply regretted" his inability to be present. The council then broke up, and departed for New York.

Aymer was indeed glad; now he should be able to see Violet again, and resume his book so long laid aside. But no; there came a new surprise. A certain recalcitrant borough in the West returned unexpectedly

a member of the wrong colour to Parliament, and the House was dissolved, and writs were issued for a general election. Three days afterwards an address appeared in the *Stirmingham Daily News*, announcing Marese Baskette as a candidate for that place in the Conservative interest. The heir had resolved to enter the House if possible, and his proclamation fell on Stirmingham, not like a thunderbolt, but like the very apple of discord dropped from heaven.

First, it upset poor Aymer's little plans and hopes. The companies were desperately alarmed, and not without reason; for if Marese got into Parliament he would, no doubt, very quickly become in himself a power, and would be supported by his party in his claim upon the building societies. It would be to the interest of his party that he should obtain his property—it would be so much substantial gain to them. Practically, Marese Baskette would have the

important borough of Stirmingham in his pocket; therefore the party would be sure to do all they could to get his claim fully admitted. Imagine that party in power; fancy the chief at the head of Government!

Every one knows that justice and equity are immaculate in England, and that no strain is ever put upon them for political purposes, or to gratify political supporters. The fact is so well understood, so patent, that it is unnecessary to adduce any proof of it. But there is, nevertheless, a certain indefinite feeling that the complexion of the political party in power extends very widely, and penetrates into quarters supposed to be remote from its centre. Whichever happens to be uppermost—but let us not even think such treasonable things.

At all events the companies had a real dread—a heart-felt fear—lest Marese Baskette should get into Parliament, and so obtain political support to his claim. They had foreseen something of the kind; they had

dreaded its happening any time ever since he came of age; but they had reckoned that his known poverty would keep him out, especially as there was a very popular landlord in the county, Sir Jasper Norton, who, with another prominent supporter of the Liberal Government, had hitherto proved invincible. It had hung over their heads for years; now it had fallen, and fallen, of all other times, just at the very moment when their leases were on the point of expiring. A more unfortunate moment for them could not have been chosen. With one consent they resolved to fight him tooth and nail. This was fatal to poor Aymer's hopes. For the company (No. 6) which employed Shaw, Shaw, and Simson could not possibly spare Mr. Broughton's energetic spirit; he must help them fight the coming man. Broughton, seeing good fees and some sport, resolved to stay, and with him poor Aymer had to remain.

The whole city was in a ferment. Marese

Baskette's name was upon every lip, and as the murmur swelled into a roar it grew into something very like a cheer for the heir. That cheer penetrated the thick walls of many a fashionable villa and mansion, and was listened to with ill-concealed anxiety. Many a portly gentleman, dressed in the tailor's best, with broad shirt-front, gold studs, and heavy ring, rubicund with good living, as he stood upon his hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, in the midst of his family circle, surrounded with luxury, grew thoughtful and absent as that dull distant roar reached his ears. Banker and speculator, city man, merchant, ironworker, coalowner, millowner, heard and trembled. For the first time they began to comprehend the meaning of the word Mob.

That word is well understood in America; twice it has been thoroughly spelt and learnt by heart in France. Will it ever be learnt in England? Outside those thick walls and strong shutters in the dingy street or

dimly-lit suburban road, where the bitter winter wind drove the cold rain and sleet along, there roamed abroad a mighty monster roused from his den. They heard and trembled. Before that monster the safeguards of civilization are as cobwebs. He may be scotched with Horse Guards and Snider rifles, beaten back into his caverns; but of what avail is that after the mischief is done? In sober earnest, the middle classes began to fear for the safety of Stirmingham. You see, the grey sewer-rats had undermined it from end to end!

It happened that the ironmasters and the coalowners, and some of the millowners, had held out long and successfully against a mighty strike: a strike that extended almost to a million of hearths and homes. They had won in the struggle, but the mind of the monster was bitter against them. They were Liberal—nearly all. Let them and their candidates keep a good look-out!

It happened also that the winter was hard and cold, work scarce, provisions dear; everything was wrong. It is at such times that, in exact opposition to all rules, the grey rat flourishes!

Finally, it happened that the party who had so strangely abdicated power just at the time when they seemed so firmly fixed, had committed a singularly, an exceptionally, unpopular act. They had robbed the poor man of his beer! They had curtailed his hours for drinking it, and to all appearance in an arbitrary way. Rumour said that they contemplated an alliance with the Cold Water Pump—that horror of horrors, the Temperance party. They had robbed the poor man of his beer! And the grey rat showed his teeth.

Marese Baskette issued his *pronunciamento*, and at once opened the campaign. Everybody read it, from the club-house to the grimy bar of the lowest public-house. The club-house smiled, and said, "Clever;" the

pot-house cheered, and cried, "He's our man." He *was* their man. Even yet, at this distance of time, there lingered in the minds of the populace a distinct recollection of the great saturnalia which had been held in the days of old Sternhold Baskette, when their candidate was born.

History magnifies itself as time rolls on; the memory of that brief hour of unlimited riot had grown till it remained the one green spot in the life of the Stirmingham populace. This was the very man—this was the very infant whose advent, almost a generation ago, had been celebrated with rejoicings such as no king or queen in these degenerate days ever offered to the people.

When old Sternhold Baskette in the joy of his heart poured out wine in gallons, spirits in casks, and beer in rivers, he baptised his son Marese, the Child of the People. And it bore fruit at this great distance of time.

John Marese Baskette was, as we know, a clever man; he had a still more subtle man

at his elbow. Between them they composed his address and his first oration. Be sure they did not forget the memory so dear to the people. Not one single thing was omitted which could tend to identify Marese Baskette with the populace. The combination of capital against them, the hard winter and price of provisions, all were skilfully turned to advantage; and, above all, the beer. When the publicans had read his address they one and all said, "He's our man." Licensed victuallers, beer-house keepers, "off the premises" men, gin-palace, eating-house, restaurant, hotel—all joined hands and marched in chorus, praising the man who promised to turn on the beer.

> For he's a jolly good fellow,
> And so say all of us!

But Marese Baskette did not wholly rely upon the poorer classes: he gained the goodwill, or at least the neutrality, of two-thirds of the middle classes, by openly declaring that when he came into his property,

as he grandly designated half the city, he should devote one-third of it to the relief of local taxation, to form a kind of common fund for sewers, gas, water, poor-rates, paving, &c. He went further—this he did not promulgate openly, but he caused it to be spread industriously abroad from house to house—and said that, when he inherited his rights, the house rents should be reduced from their present exorbitant figure.

Now it was notorious that the companies only waited to see whether they could tide over the year of expiration of their leases before they raised the rents. The arrow therefore went home. Baskette had hit the nail upon the head. The other party began to threaten petitions for bribery—contending that these promises were nothing short of it.

The *Daily Post* published a leader on "Glaring Corruption and Wholesale Venality." Baskette and Theodore smiled. What would be the use of unseating him

if, as they clearly saw, the opposite party was gone to utter destruction?

Baskette met with a triumphant reception at his first meeting. Whenever he appeared in the streets he was cheered to the echo.

The building societies and the Corporation were desperately alarmed. Though so bitterly opposed to each other at ordinary times, a common fear gave them unity. They held a secret meeting—at least they thought it was secret, but such things are impossible in our time. The pen is everywhere—its sharp point penetrates through the thickest wall. They united, formed themselves into an association, voted funds —secret also—hired speakers and hired roughs.

It all leaked out. The *Stirmingham Daily News*—Baskette's paper—came out with a report and a leader, and held up the poor heir to the commiseration of the people. See what a combination against

him!—anything to keep him out of his rights. Hired speakers to talk him down—hired roughs to knock him on the head. Vested interests arrayed against him—poor heir! How deeply to be pitied! How greatly to be sympathised with! The paper used stronger language than this, and hinted at "gangs of foul conspirators," but that was not gentlemanly.

The exposure was worth a thousand votes to Baskette. But though exposed, the Corporation and the companies never ceased their efforts. Between them they comprised almost all of the rich employers of labour. They had one terrible engine—a fearful instrument of oppression and torture—invented in our modern days, in order that we may not get free and "become as gods." They put on the screw.

There is not a working man in England, from the hedger and ditcher, and the wretch who breaks the flints by the roadside, up to the best paid clerk or manager of a bank

—not one single man who receives wages from another—who does not know the meaning of that word.

Let no one imagine that the "screw" is confined in its operation to the needy artisan or the labourer. It extends into all ranks of society, poisons every family circle, tortures every tenant and householder—all who in any way depend for comfort, luxury, or peace upon another person. There is but one rank who are free—the few who, whether for wages or as tenants, never have to look to others.

Society is divided into two sections—the first, infinitely numerous, and the second, infinitely few—*i.e.*, the Screwed-down, and the Screw-drivers. Now, the Corporation and the companies were the screw-drivers, and they twisted the horrible engine up tight.

Perhaps they gave it one turn too many; at all events the mob set up a yell. They formed processions and marched about the

streets with bundles of screws, strung like bunches of keys, at the end of poles. Squibs flew in all directions—too personal to be quoted here. Somebody wrote a parody on "John Brown's Knapsack"—representing old Sternhold Baskette as John Brown, and his soul as marching on. This, set to music, resounded in every corner.

It is sad, but it is true. Everything might still have gone off pretty quiet, had it not been for religion, or rather pseudo-religion. There were in the city vast numbers of workmen of the lowest class from Ireland, and when the watchwords "Orangemen" and "Papists" are mentioned, every one will understand. Fights occurred hourly — a grand battle-royal was imminent. The grey rats did all they could to foster the animosity, and got up sham quarrels to set fire to the excited passions of the mob. Their game was riot, in order that they might plunder. While the fools were fight-

ing and the wise men trying to put them down, the grey rats meant to make off with all they could get.

Aymer, having by this time made for himself some little reputation for intelligence and quick observation, was sent out by the committee, of which Broughton was chairman, to watch the temper of the people; to penetrate into all the corners and out-of-the-way places; to hang on the skirts of the crowd and pick up their hopes and wishes, and to make reports from time to time as anything struck him. He was even to bring in the lampoons and squibs that were circulated, and, if possible, to spy out the secret doings of the other party —a commission which gave him liberty to roam. He wished to be gone, but this was better than the close office-work. He should see something of life; he should see man face to face. (In gilded salons and well-bred society it is only the profile one sees—the full face is averted.) He put on his roughest

suit, took his note-book, and strolled out into the city.

The first thing he had to report was that an insinuation which had been spread abroad against Baskette was actually working in his favour. It had been thrown out that he was upon too familiar terms with a certain lady, singer and actress, the fame of whose wonderful beauty was sullied with suspicions of her frailty. With a certain section of the people, who prided themselves upon being "English to the backbone," this was resented as unfair. With a far larger portion it was at once believed, and, amid sly nods and winks, taken as another proof that Baskette was one of themselves.

Aymer wandered about the city; he saw its horrors, its crime. At such a period the sin, the wickedness and misery which commonly lurks in corners, came out and flaunted in the daylight. A great horror fell upon him—a horror of the drunkenness,

the cursing, the immorality, the fierce brutishness. He shuddered. Not that he was himself pure, but he was sensitive and quick to understand, to see beneath the surface. He was of an age when the mind deals with broad generalities. If this was the state of one city only—then, poor England!

His imagination pictured a time when this monster might be uppermost. One night he ascended the tower of a great brewery and looked down upon the city, all flaring with gas. Up from the depth came the shouting, the hum of thousands, the tramp of the multitudes. He looked afar. The horizon was bright with blazing fires—the sky red with a crimson and yellow glow. Not a star was visible, a dense cloud of smoke hid everything. The iron furnaces shot forth their glowing flames, the engines puffed and snorted. He thought of Violet and trembled: when the monster was let loose, what then?

He descended and wandered away he knew not exactly whither, but he found himself towards midnight mixed in a crowd around the police station. Jammed in amid the throng he was shoved against the wall, but fortunately a lamp-post preserved him from the crush. However, he could not move. The gas-light fell upon the wall and lit up the proclamations of "V.R."—the advertisements of missing and lost, the descriptions of persons who were wanted, &c.

One sheet, half-defaced with the wind and rain and mud splashed against it, caught his eye—

"Escaped," so ran the fragment, "from . . . . mingham Asylum, a lunatic of homicidal tendencies. . . . . Stabbed a warder . . . . killed his wife by driving a nail into her head. . . . . Is at large. His description—Long grey hair, restless eye, peculiar ears, walks with a shambling gait, and has a melancholy expression of countenance.

Plays fantastic airs upon a tin whistle, and is particularly fond of tinkering." . . .

A new bill, "Two Hundred Pounds Reward," for the apprehension of a defaulting bank manager, blotted out the rest.

But Aymer had read enough. A sickening sensation seized him—this horrible being loose upon society, tinkering, playing upon a tin whistle, and driving nails into women's heads! In his ears sounded the din of tremendous shouts, "Baskette for ever!" and he saw a carriage go by from which the horses had been taken, and in which a man was standing upright, with his hat off, bowing. It was Marese Baskette returning from an evening meeting, and dragged in his carriage by the mob to his hotel.

Aymer caught a glance of his dark eye flashing with triumph, and it left an unpleasant impression upon him. But the shouts rose up to the thick cloud of smoke overhead—"Baskette for ever! Baskette for ever!"

"Oh! my love," wrote Aymer to Violet, "this is, indeed, an awful place. I begin to live in dread of my fellow-creatures. Not for worlds—no, not for worlds, would I be the owner of this city (as so many are striving to be), lest I should be held, partly at least, responsible hereafter for its miseries, its crimes, its drunkenness, its nameless, indefinable horrors."

These words, read by what afterwards happened, are remarkable. Aymer's last vision of Stirmingham was the same man drawn again in his carriage amid tenfold louder shouts than before, "Baskette for ever!" He headed the poll by over 1000 votes.

* * * * *

The grey rats were triumphant.

END OF VOL. II.

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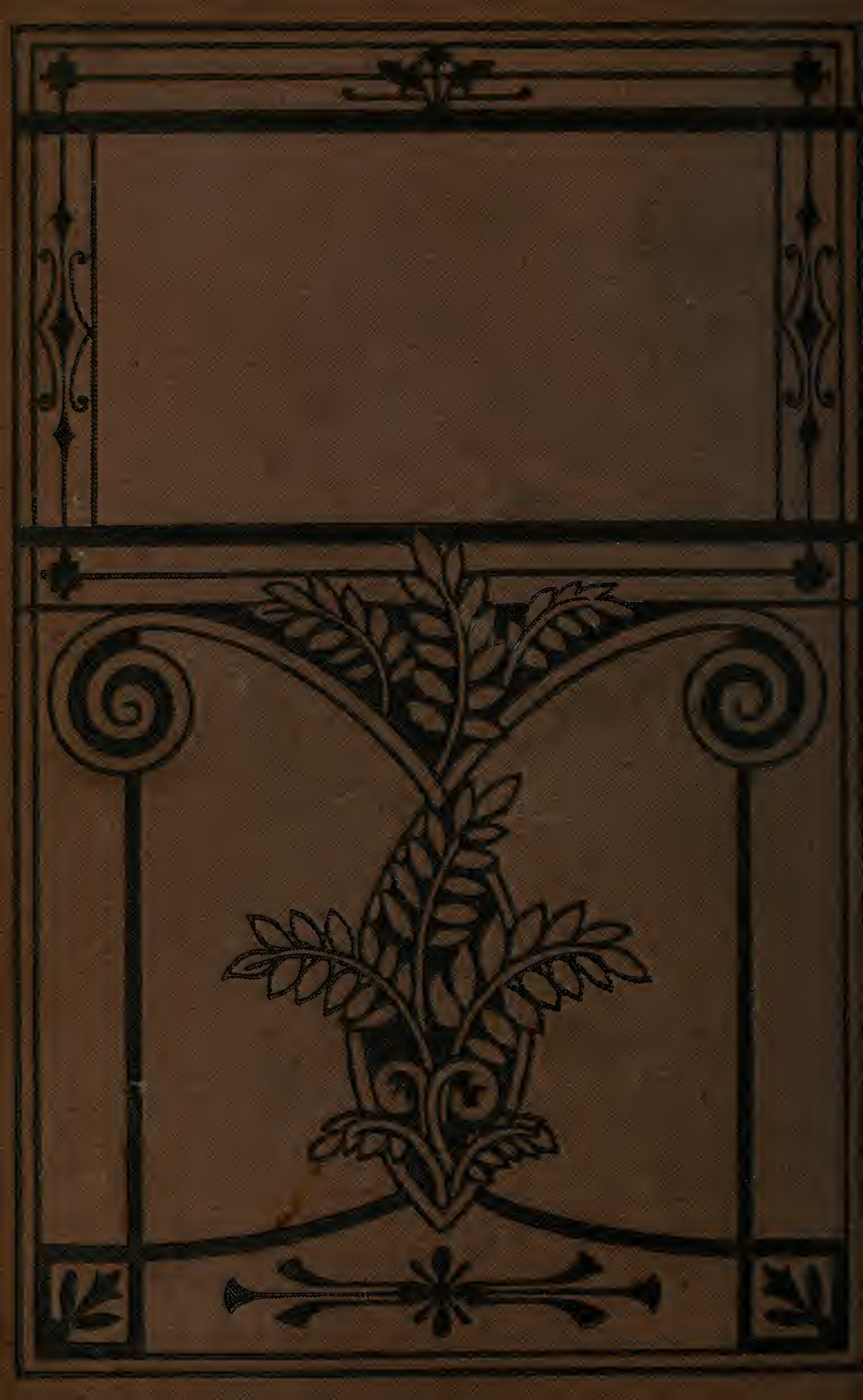
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